

The Baring Foundation

Collaborating to Advise; Lessons from Avon, Coventry and Nottingham

Kevin Ireland

Strengthening the Voluntary Sector – independence

The Baring Foundation

The Baring Foundation was set up in 1969 to give money to charities and voluntary organisations pursuing charitable purposes. In 40 years we have given over £98 million in grants. Our budget for grant-making in 2011 is £2.2 million.

The Foundation believes in the fundamental value to society of an independent and effective voluntary sector. It uses its funds to strengthen voluntary sector organisations, responding flexibly, creatively and pragmatically to their needs. The Foundation puts a high value on learning from organisations and their beneficiaries and seeks to add value to grants by encouraging the sharing of knowledge through a variety of means.

Strengthening the Voluntary Sector

In 1996, the Baring Foundation launched the Strengthening the Voluntary Sector grants programme. This programme funds organisational development work aimed at supporting organisations to be efficient and effective. The programme has supported 712 organisations, giving a total of £14.5 million.

Strengthening the Voluntary Sector – independence

In 2006, the trustees added a focus to the grants programme inviting organisations to apply for work that would help them to maintain or increase their independence from government. In 2008 the programme was focused further to support the independence of advice and advocacy organisations. This paper forms part of a series of papers designed to share information and lessons from this grants programme. Please see the back cover for details of other papers in the series. These are available on our web-site.

www.baringfoundation.org.uk

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Acknowledgements

We would like to express great appreciation to those who were interviewed and provided information as part of this study¹. Each interviewee has had the opportunity to read and comment on the first draft of this report. Their views have been taken into account in the final draft but, of course, they may not all agree with all aspects. The responsibility for any errors or omissions rests solely with the author.

June 2011

1) Annex 1 lists those interviewed.

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Foreword

Charities, and by extension their beneficiaries, depend on one another's success. In this sense, charities exist in an ecosystem that they have an important responsibility to sustain. Charities can choose to compete with one another, or they can choose to offer mutual support and cooperation. This report explores three fine examples of where charities have chosen to cooperate.

The current circumstances for legal advice organisations are hugely challenging. A sustained period of funding and policy reform followed by more recent rises in demand for their services and pressure on income are making life extremely tough. Rather than retreat, the organisations in this report have reached out to others in their sector to pursue their shared aim in imaginative and effective ways. The depth of collaboration is impressive: combining resources, assessing needs, designing and delivering services, assessing impact and addressing wider policy and system issues about how demand for advice is created and can be reduced. Also notable is the important role in all this of officials in the respective local authorities. There appears in these departments to be a genuine desire to work with advice organisations for the benefit of residents, combining the best of the voluntary sector with the resources of the public sector.

The Baring Foundation has had a long-standing interest in supporting charities to be more efficient and effective. This has developed in recent years to explore how organisations can use a strong infrastructure to support their independence from government, by which we mean how well these organisations can uphold their own special purpose and values in their relationships with government. I think this report shows the role that this kind of organisational development has played in helping these organisations to determine highly productive relationships with government, where the interests of their beneficiaries are being well served. This is by no means the end of the story, organisations will need to continue to invest in this effort, but they do so with resources and some shared history that will stand them in good stead.

Andrew Hind CB
Chair of the Strengthening the Voluntary Sector Committee,
Baring Foundation

Summary

Since 2008 the Baring Foundation's Strengthening the Voluntary Sector (STVS) grants programme has focused on supporting advice and advocacy organisations. In particular, support has been given to help these organisations explore how organisational development activities can help them to maintain their independence from government.

The grants awarded have combined a local focus in Avon, Coventry and Nottingham with work that has a national reach. An important feature of the work in the three local areas has been collaboration, firstly between advice organisations and then between the advice sectors and the respective local authorities. These, plus AdviceUK's BOLD initiative, are introduced in section one.

The advice sector faces a number of challenges in the current operating environment. Section two reviews five features of this environment; public sector commissioning, local strategies and partnerships, the activities of the Legal Services Commission, the onset of recession and the subsequent cuts in public expenditure and finally the introduction of the idea of the Big Society. A key question for this report is whether collaboration provides a more effective way for advice organisations to respond to these circumstances.

Section three reflects on the fact that collaboration has been increasingly examined and promoted in the voluntary sector. Virtually all studies and advice underline the potential benefits of collaboration, from improving services to increasing policy influence, particularly where issues are chronic and require different interventions from different organisations. There are, however, costs and challenges to collaboration which need to be taken into account.

Section four reports the results of extended interviews with key actors in the three target initiatives and with AdviceUK. A very strong picture is presented from each of the areas in this study that collaboration has brought a wide range of significant benefits. These include:

- improved capacity of the advice sector. This was present across a wide range of areas. Improved IT systems and initiatives such as shared web-sites have assisted members of the public to access advice and has enabled advice organisations to share information and make better referrals. The greater personal contact between organisations has led to the development of shared policies and training, joint data recording and reporting, greater innovation in the delivery of services and greater access to funding opportunities, especially for the smaller organisations involved. There has also been increased capacity and effectiveness at influencing local and national policy.
- improved relationships with local authorities. These have led to better understanding of needs, more responsive commissioning, better understanding of how demand for advice is created (often by the public sector itself) and ways to address this and so reduce demand. There is a definite sense that the relationships that have been established over recent years have been important in helping public and voluntary sector alike to face up to the financial challenges of cuts in public expenditure in more productive ways.

It has also been clear that there are many challenges and risks in setting up and running collaborations. The work in Avon, Coventry and Nottingham has not been loose arrangements of convenience, but planned activities requiring significant investments of time, money and trust. In all three areas, participating organisations have strongly concluded that the benefits outweigh the costs.

Leadership and a clear vision stand out as vital elements in successful collaboration. Turning initial mistrust and suspicion into trust and confidence was an important factor in each of the areas. The role of external facilitators has also been valuable as a specialist resource, an honest broker and leader.

Measuring the outcomes of advice services is complex. All three areas in this study acknowledge the work that needs to be done on this. However, the evidence here suggests that the collaboration has itself facilitated the kind of contact between advice providers and local authorities that has helped to move beyond counting “units of advice” but there remains some way to go towards capturing a fuller appreciation of the outcomes achieved.

It is clear that collaboration requires continuing investment and support. There is no ‘end state’ of facilitating collaboration and this poses a question for funders about whether the investment to support working collaboratively provides sufficient returns. This study provides a strong case for believing that collaborating in the ways examined here has advantages for service users, for voluntary and community organisations and for local authorities in their strategic role and as commissioners. In terms of the Big Society, collaborations of this kind appear to have a lot to offer and highlight the importance of investing in structures that enable the sort of participation that the ideas behind the Big Society seek to promote. Most importantly, they provide a way to ensure the continuing engagement and support of the smaller, community based organisations on which the Big Society must surely depend.

Throughout the STVS programme, independence has been defined as the positive freedom of voluntary organisations to uphold their purpose and values. The results in this study suggest that the sort of collaboration carried out here has helped organisations to achieve this. The engagement of advice organisations alongside local authorities has helped ensure that the needs of service users are better understood and met, quality has remained at the forefront of considerations about service delivery and risk has been more equitably shared.

Section 1: Introduction

This report forms part of a series of papers designed to share information and lessons from the Baring Foundation Strengthening the Voluntary Sector (STVS) programme. It draws on interviews and experiences in three collaborations supported by the STVS 2008 programme, including support to AdviceUK, which has provided assistance to two of these collaborations. The partners have sought, through their collaborative approach, to improve the provision of social welfare legal advice services in their respective areas: Avon, Coventry and Nottingham.

The study seeks to explore three key questions:

1. What benefits have been realised as a result of the collaborations?
2. What challenges have arisen in the process?
3. What can be done to facilitate or improve the impact of such collaborations?

Strengthening the Voluntary Sector Programme

The Strengthening the Voluntary Sector programme was originally launched in 1996, funding organisational development work aimed at supporting organisations to be more efficient and effective. In 2006, the trustees added a focus to the grants programme, inviting organisations to apply for work that would help them to maintain or increase their independence from government. In 2008 the programme was focused further to support the independence of advice and advocacy organisations. It was aimed that, as a result of support:²

- The funded organisations would collect, or access from other sources, better evidence of client needs and/or better evidence about demand for services;
- A definition of 'quality advice' and of 'quality advocacy' would have been produced that reflects client needs as defined by the sector, not by government;
- Government definitions of 'quality advice' and 'quality advocacy' would be moving to reflect the sector's own, particularly focusing on the needs of clients;
- Funding and commissioning arrangements would be changed in line with evidence of needs and the definition of quality;
- There would be increased capacity in organisations to influence policy;
- There would be a more productive relationship with government.

Whilst trustees wanted to focus on addressing issues at the local level, they also specifically asked applicants how their work would generate wider lessons. This report is part of drawing out those lessons.

Methodology

This study is based on information obtained in interviews, plus a review of reports and documentation. Extended interviews were conducted with one local authority representative and key voluntary sector representatives from each study area (two each for Nottingham and Coventry and one for Avon), plus the lead officer for AdviceUK. Interviews were recorded and transcribed in full. The interviews were supplemented by documentary evidence and a review of literature was undertaken in relation to those aspects referred to in the sections below on the environmental scan and collaboration. Additionally, a meeting

2) A full description of the background and aims of the 2008 STVS grants programme can be found in: Matthew Smerdon, *Rights with Meaning*; Baring Foundation Working Paper No. 4, October 2009 available at www.baringfoundation.org.uk.

of the Nottingham Steering Group for the Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Advice pilot project³ was attended.

Outline of support received by the collaborations

Annex 2 provides a short description of each of the three area based initiatives supported by the STVS 2008 programme, plus that for AdviceUK. A very brief synopsis of each is provided below.

Advice Centres for Avon

ACFA is a regional umbrella body with 50 members which provide a range of community, general and specialist legal advice across Bristol, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset. Members of ACFA may be generalist agencies for which advice is a small part of their portfolio. In July 2009 ACFA established the Advice Network (AN) as a separate project, where members of AN have the provision of social welfare/legal advice as their core function. The purpose of this partnership is to improve access to advice and legal services by working collaboratively together and with funders to ensure the development of sustainable services that meet the needs of the most vulnerable communities.

The STVS 2008 programme provided £175,000 over three years to support ACFA to develop the Advice Network, strengthen its influence and maintain the independence of its members. This dovetails with funding of £419,000 over three years from the BIG Lottery Fund: Advice Plus programme. Achievements have included influencing the local authority's commissioning plans in Bristol, supporting two consortia of agencies who successfully bid for LSC contracts covering the whole area, securing local authority funding for the main advice providers for three years without a cut, developing effective information systems, benchmarking member agencies, implementing a new common monitoring system, coordinating consultation responses and supporting smaller agencies to participate effectively in the partnership and with the local authority.

Advice Services Coventry

Established in 2005, ASC is a partnership of (currently) 12 independent social welfare advice centres in Coventry which are working together to develop a coordinated approach to the delivery of advice services. Once again working in conjunction with the BIG Lottery Fund: Advice Plus programme, £191,000 was approved under STVS in 2008 for a two year programme of activities to strengthen individual partners of ASC and the partnership as a whole. A further £150,000 was approved under the STVS 2010 to develop, implement and evaluate a mixed economy model for community-based advice delivery in Coventry, to strengthen agencies involved and to influence commissioners of advice services. Achievements have included: mapping need in the area and what matters to clients; improving IT and the accuracy of joint data; improved social policy reporting and impact; using the 'systems thinking' methodology⁴ to map some public services from the perspective of the customer and to streamline the processes followed by advice agencies in the city to make them more customer focussed; undertaking a financial health check for the collaboration and its members, facilitating improved pricing; examining the outcomes of advice and the contribution it makes to the local community.

Advice Nottingham

Advice Nottingham is a consortium of seven advice agencies which have been working together strategically since June 2007 to ensure that clients have access to consistent, high-quality and timely advice services, able to respond to current and emerging need. £30,000 was approved under 2008 STVS programme to support frontline advice agencies in

3) This is a working group involving representatives of Nottingham City Council, AdviceUK and two independent advice services that reviews the progress of individual cases in order to understand the systemic issues that affect the efficient management of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit cases in the city. This is one of the initiatives arising out of the work being funded by the Baring Foundation in Nottingham.

4) 'Systems thinking' is an analytical approach led by Vanguard Consulting that investigates the services delivered by an organisation as a system, in order to improve its efficiency. AdviceUK has led on utilising the approach in advice agencies. See <http://www.systemsthinking.co.uk/home.asp>.

Nottingham to take part in a 'systems thinking in advice' pilot. The majority of this funding was directed through AdviceUK's BOLD programme (see below), but with some to each of the participating members in Nottingham. This built on earlier support provided by Lloyds TSB Foundation to develop a new strategic approach and the BIG Lottery Fund to develop the structure for an integrated advice service in the city. A further £86,000 was approved under the STVS 2010 programme to complete the redesign of independent advice services, based on evidence of client demand and to influence service commissioning and reduce unnecessary demand for advice from public service failures.

AN has developed a strong relationship with the City Council, including participation in the development of the approach to commissioning. This has ensured that the contribution of all agencies – including the smaller, community based – was recognised and included in the strategic approach. A Partnership Agreement with Nottingham City Council was adopted in July 2010. Activities have helped improve the organisational capacity of AN members.

AdviceUK

AUK is the UK's largest support network for free, independent advice centres. £200,000 was approved over two years under 2008 STVS programme for BOLD: a partnership involving AUK, the New Economics Foundation (nef) and Directory of Social Change (DSC). Funding was to develop their user-centred advice service approach based on 'systems thinking', to improve tendering skills in advice agencies and to strengthen relationships with central government. This built upon former support from the Baring Foundation to develop the 'systems thinking' approach (the RADICAL project). Under the STVS 2010 programme a further £135,000 was approved to secure evidence of the effectiveness and economic value of the BOLD intervention, develop a sustainable method for its extension and secure support from central and local government.

The initial focus was on Manchester and Coventry, but with Manchester City Council deciding to enter into negotiations with the Legal Services Commission to develop a Community Legal Advice Centre during this time, the emphasis of the programme there changed to that of providing support to local advice organisations involved in the commissioning process. With this change in emphasis, BOLD supported existing 'systems thinking' work in Nottingham and the development of the approach to commissioning in the city. In Coventry the focus was to support advice agencies to demonstrate the value of their contribution to Coventry's priorities. The report *Outcomes in Advice* also used a Social Return On Investment (SROI) approach to value the advice given and to cost the public service failures that cause people to seek advice.

Section 2: A quick scan of the environment

The purpose of this section is to introduce briefly some of the factors influencing the operating environment of the agencies providing legal advice services at the local level and to seek to identify key issues for those agencies.

The factors we look at are:

- Public sector commissioning
- Local strategies and partnerships
- The Legal Services Commission, Community Legal Service, CLACs and CLANs
- Onset of recession and cuts in public expenditure
- The Big Society

Public sector commissioning

In reviewing threats to independence of the VCS, *Rights with Meaning* in 2009⁵ identified the potential threats arising from the developing approach to commissioning. It argued that whilst there was reduced public sector provision of services, there was an increase in central control over the incoming providers of those services. There was, it argued, the assumption that performance and value for money are best improved by introducing competition, targets and extensive reporting arrangements, reflecting a model of service provision that does not take adequate account of the needs of users or the expertise of providers. Whilst these comments reflect the reality of experience on the ground, the published advice in relation to the commissioning process is much more in line with what VCS organisations seek. For instance, the National Audit Office provides online guidance to those involved in public sector commissioning from third sector organisations⁶, in which it promotes a model involving five key stages:

1. Assessing needs
2. Designing services
3. Sourcing providers
4. Delivering to users
5. Monitoring and evaluation

It identifies the benefits that third sector organisations can provide to commissioners as:

- Understanding of the needs of service users and communities that the public sector needs to address;
- Closeness to the people that the public sector wants to reach;
- Ability to deliver outcomes that the public sector finds it hard to deliver on its own;
- Innovation in developing solutions; and
- Performance in delivering services.

It also makes clear that:

“Commissioning can lead to a relationship with third sector and other organisations that is more than, or not even, a financial one and that achieves better value for money for taxpayers.”

5) Baring Foundation STVS Working Paper 4.

6) See the National Audit Office website at:

http://www.nao.org.uk/sectors/third_sector/successful_commissioning/toolkit_home/toolkit_home.aspx

7) National Audit Office website as above.

Three criteria are identified for assessing value for money for government expenditure: Economy, Efficiency and Effectiveness, with a fourth that may apply in certain circumstances: Equity (the extent to which the services are available to and reach all people that they are intended to). The advice underlines the need to focus on outcomes, not just outputs, process or inputs, although it notes that not all outcomes will be obvious, direct or easily valued. It also suggests taking a long term view, seeking an optimal combination of whole life cost, and it underlines the importance of the Compact⁸ as a voluntary agreement between public and third sector organisations.

The NAO identifies eight principles of good commissioning:

- *“Understanding the needs of users and other communities by ensuring that, alongside other consultees, you engage with the third sector organisations, as advocates, to access their specialist knowledge;*
- *Consulting potential provider organisations, including those from the third sector and local experts, well in advance of commissioning new services, working with them to set priority outcomes for that service;*
- *Putting outcomes for users at the heart of the strategic planning process;*
- *Mapping the fullest practical range of providers with a view to understanding the contribution they could make to delivering those outcomes;*
- *Considering investing in the capacity of the provider base, particularly those working with hard-to-reach groups;*
- *Ensuring contracting processes are transparent and fair, facilitating the involvement of the broadest range of suppliers, including considering sub-contracting and consortia building, where appropriate;*
- *Ensuring long-term contracts and risk sharing, wherever appropriate, as ways of achieving efficiency and effectiveness; and*
- *Seeking feedback from service users, communities and providers in order to review the effectiveness of the commissioning process in meeting local needs.”⁹*

There is much more detail in the NAO’s advice, but it can be clearly seen from the selections above that it promotes an active process that starts with understanding the needs of service users in the community and works in stages through to monitoring how effectively those needs were met.

The potential contribution of the wider voluntary and not for profit sector is also underlined in the Government’s Green Paper, ‘Modernising Commissioning’, published in December 2010¹⁰. In the introduction to that document, Nick Hurd, Minister for Civil Society explained the coalition government made a commitment to:

“support the creation and expansion of mutuals, co-operatives, charities and social enterprises, and enable these groups to have much greater involvement in the running of public services. This reflects our respect for the contribution that civil society organisations can make to shaping and delivering more efficient public services that better meet the needs of the people who use them.”¹¹

As mentioned above, the reality of the commissioning experience for many VCS organisations is some distance from the above official advice. Thus if collaborations provide a more effective way of engaging with commissioning authorities they may assist the VCS and the commissioners together in achieving a more effective approach in line with national policy.

Local strategies and partnerships

In a briefing in October 2010¹², the Local Government Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) highlighted the extent to which the context for partnership working at the local authority level (and indeed the landscape around it) is rapidly changing. Local area agreements

8) See: <http://www.thecompact.org.uk/files/140472/FileName/TheCompact.pdf>

9) http://www.nao.org.uk/sectors/third_sector/successful_commissioning/successful_commissioning/general_principles/principles_of_good_commission.aspx

10) *Modernising Commissioning: increasing the role of charities, social enterprises, mutuals and cooperatives in public service delivery*. Cabinet Office, December 2010. See <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/resource-library/modernising-commissioning-green-paper>

11) Cabinet Office, page 3.

12) See: <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/aio/23885112>

(LAAs) were introduced in 2004, as a framework for partnership working at local level; and between local areas and central government. The current round of LAAs applied to the end of March 2011 and the Local Government Secretary, Eric Pickles, has announced that they will be disbanded, along with the National Performance Indicators that underpinned them.

Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) bring together representatives from the local statutory, voluntary, community and private sectors to address local problems, allocate funding and discuss strategies and initiatives. They aim to encourage joint working and community involvement, and prevent 'silo working', with the general aim of ensuring resources are better allocated at a local level.¹³ These, too, are subject to review and IDeA reports intelligence it has gathered on where the thinking has got to on future focus and arrangements for partnership working. From this it concludes that partnership working continues to be seen as an 'essential ingredient' in the new context; and indeed that in the majority of places the LSP (albeit reconstituted and probably re-branded too) is still seen as having a central role to play. They also report that a number of councils are continuing to develop their own ideas for much modified forms of LAA, developed locally without top-down interference.¹⁴

In December 2010, the Government also laid before Parliament the 'Localism Bill':

"A landmark bill that heralds a ground-breaking shift in power to councils and communities overturning decades of central government control."¹⁵

IDeA concludes that the reduction in 'top-down' prescription coupled with a Coalition view on the 'localism' agenda, is fundamentally re-directing the focus for partnership working and that we are seeing:

- much greater emphasis being placed on '**outward accountability**' – being held to account by the citizen rather than by Whitehall;
- renewed interest in **localism and devolution** – and ensuring issues are addressed at the lowest practicable spatial level; and
- a shift towards adopting more of an '**enabling**' role – helping people and communities do more for themselves and each other ('Big Society').

In spite of all these changes – indeed, enhanced because of them – identifying need, commissioning public services and clarifying the role of the voluntary and community sector at the local level is likely to continue to be dictated by local strategies, developed in partnership. Thus collaborations that seek to make improvements in these areas must engage effectively in, and be part of, those partnerships.

Legal Services Commission, Community Legal Service, CLACS and CLANS

The Legal Services Commission was established in 2000, with the purpose of promoting the availability of legal services – information, advice and representation – in civil law. It has the duty of developing and maintaining the Community Legal Service (CLS). In 2006, following a review¹⁶ and consultation, it published a five-year strategy for the CLS.¹⁷ The direction set out in that strategy involved purchasing bundles of services together, establishing Centres and Networks and contracting at a regional and sometimes national level, drawing together local authority, as well as LSC funding. The LSC recognised that this would, over time, lead to fewer but larger contracts for legal aid work.

Thus Community Legal Aid Centres (CLACs) and Community Legal Aid Networks (CLANs) were established. They aim either to pull together these services in a geographical area into a single entity (CLACs) or bring together a consortium of providers supplying complementary services (CLANs). CLACs and CLANs are jointly commissioned and funded

13) See: <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelId=23884523>

14) See: <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelId=20784973>

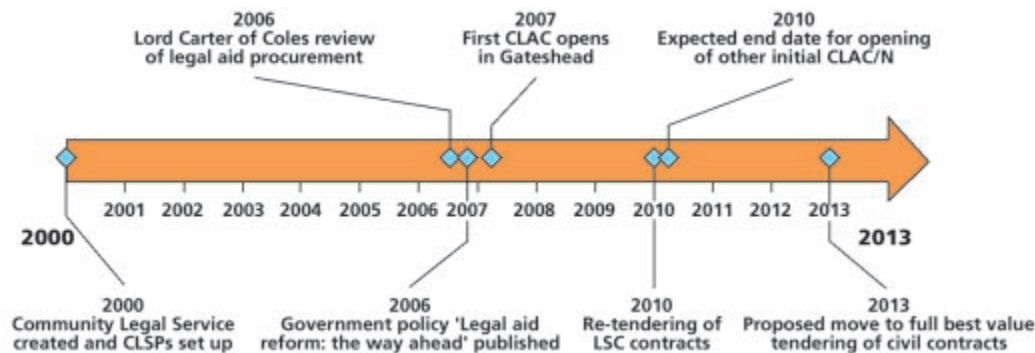
15) As reported in a press release from the Department of Communities and Local Government: *Localism Bill starts a new era of people power*. See: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/news/newsroom/1794971>

16) Lord Carter of Coles: *Legal Aid: A market-based approach to reform*, July 2006.

17) *Making Legal Rights a Reality: The Legal Service Commission's Strategy for the Community Legal Service 2006-2011*. LSC 2006.

jointly by the LSC and local authority and aim to provide an integrated and seamless social welfare law service.

A timeline providing a summary of key changes that have happened to legal advice funding over the last ten years is illustrated below:¹⁸



There are currently ten CLAC/CLANS in operation.¹⁹ These are in: Derby, Gateshead, Hull, Leicester, Portsmouth, East Riding, Barking & Dagenham, Manchester, West Sussex and Wakefield. Two of these are provided by private sector organisations, two by the voluntary sector and six by a partnership between private and voluntary sector. In total, across the ten CLAC/Ns, a total of 11 private sector companies are involved as providers and 13 voluntary sector organisations.²⁰

The Legal Services Research Centre (LSRC) commissioned four separate research studies to investigate the establishment and performance of CLACs²¹, each reporting in 2010. Of most relevance to this study is the process evaluation of the establishment of the first CLACs and CLANS. This examined the factors related to commissioning, set up and delivery of advice services.

At the time that the evaluation commenced in January 2009, contracts had been signed to establish CLACs in five areas and discussions were underway about the establishment of CLACs or CLANS in nine other locations. All five operational sites were included in the evaluation, along with three of the non-operational sites. The research was extensive and it is not the objective here to provide a detailed review. Overall, it concluded that the implementation of CLACs and CLANS was justified primarily in terms of more integrated service delivery, particularly to address clients with clusters of need more effectively. Stakeholders consulted in the research did not challenge the need to deliver more integrated services for those with clusters of problems, but they did have substantial concerns about the ability of CLACs in particular to deliver improvements in integration which did not reduce access in other ways. The complexity and resource intensity of the commissioning process was highlighted, along with the need for improved performance monitoring.

The financial cost of establishing a CLAC/CLAN was estimated at over £45,000 for commissioners and £61,000 for providers²². The report explains that it would not be appropriate to generalise from these figures and assume that the same cost would be incurred in all CLAC and CLAN sites: however, it also noted that the figures underestimate total resource costs as they do not capture all the staff time incurred in establishing a CLAC

18) This diagram is taken from Tribal Group's report for IDeA and LGA: *Early lessons from changes to legal advice provision and funding – the local authority experience*. March 2010 page 6.

19) Information according to the Legal Services Commission website: http://www.legalservices.gov.uk/civil/innovations/community_legal_advice_centres_and_networks.asp

20) The CAB is involved in partnership delivery in five of the CLAC/Ns, but as local CABs operate largely independently, each has been counted separately. If the local CABx were counted as one organisation it would reduce the numbers of voluntary sector organisations involved to 9.

21) Fox, C., Moorhead, R., Sefton, M. and Wong, K.: *Community Legal Advice Centres and Networks: A Process Evaluation*: Legal Services Research Centre 2010; Buck, A., Smith, M., Sidaway, J., and Scanlan: *Piecing It Together: Exploring One-Stop Legal Service Delivery in Community Legal Advice Centres*: Legal Services Research Centre 2010; Smith, M. and Patel, A. *Using Monitoring Data: Examining Community Legal Advice Centre Delivery*: Legal Services Research Centre 2010; Buck, A., Smith, M., Sidaway, J. and Balmer, N.J.: *Community Legal Advice Centres: A Survey of Clients in Reception Areas*: Legal Services Commission 2010.

22) *A process evaluation*, LSRC 2010 Page 94.

or CLAN. It is not clear whether the figures include the cost of those organisations that bid for the contract unsuccessfully – it would appear not. Additional to these development costs, there were the start-up costs expended by preferred providers. A grant of £70,000 was available to cover these costs, but two of the providers found this to be insufficient. The financial risk to voluntary sector providers in participating in the commissioning process was underlined by the researchers. No information was provided on former providers that were not successful in the bidding process, or on the impact of any loss of such providers.

The LSRC's survey of clients in reception areas²³ found that vulnerable and disadvantaged groups were using the services of the CLAC/CLAN, that their problem was having a "disproportionately detrimental affect" and that they were largely drawn from low income households. However: "The findings indicate that aspects of accessibility beyond logistical factors require consideration. Social networks are clearly important in encouraging and signposting people to advice. For people without these networks, the role of others such as health professionals and social workers takes on a crucial importance." The research results also "demonstrate that people who accessed the CLAC service through outreach had a different profile to main centre CLAC users. Given the reported ease of access of outreach locations, outreach advice may constitute an important means of ensuring access to people who might otherwise struggle to attend the main CLAC venue."

The review of monitoring data, examining CLAC delivery, drew a number of implications from its findings, within which were:²⁴

- Mixed success has been achieved in case opening targets, although performance has improved over time.
- There were demonstrable gains for clients with multiple problems in being able to access services from a single provider. However, the extent of gains is shaped by the profile of contracted services prior to the introduction of the CLAC, suggesting gains could be greatest in areas where there is limited existing provision.
- "The absence of any obligations to provide data on general help clients which enables them to be matched to closed case records at the specialist help level is an omission. Further, there is no requirement to monitor the extent to which clients present with multiple problems or the response of services in addressing them."
- General lessons for monitoring include: the need to have an agreed reporting framework in place prior to services becoming operational, the need for a careful and timely examination of monitoring data to allow the early identification of inaccuracies and data inconsistencies, and the need to understand the complex forces which determine the appropriate time interval before which any meaningful assessment of services can be made.

In September 2009 the Ministry of Justice published a study of the delivery of legal advice at the local level, based on research between January and June 2009.²⁵ The Study focused on the following four issues:

- The impact of the recession and the demand for civil legal advice.
- The impact of civil legal advice fixed fees on local providers – financially and in terms of the type of work they are taking on.
- The initial experience of Community Legal Advice Centres, including the impact on other providers in the area.
- Trends in funding from sources other than the Community Legal Service, including local authority funding, national lottery funding, charities, central government departments, and others.

23) *A survey of clients in reception areas*, LSRC 2010.

24) *Using Monitoring Data*; LSRC 2010 pages 36-38.

25) *A Study of Legal Advice at the Local Level*: Ministry of Justice September 2009.

This report contained nine recommendations, each of which is relevant to this study:

- Recommendation 1: Further work should be done to consider the role of providers who focus on more complex cases or “difficult” clients, as the ‘fixed fee’ approach adopted by the LSC created difficulties for providers whose caseload is weighted toward more complex cases or “difficult to serve” clients.
- Recommendation 2: Consideration be given to developing a monitoring system to identify the impact the fixed fee approach in creating “perverse incentives” that encourage behaviour by providers that is not in the best interest of vulnerable clients, including “cherry picking” the most straightforward cases.
- Recommendation 3: Further work be done to understand the basis of the financial impact of elements of the fixed fee scheme and “standard monthly payments” – in particular in relation to the creation of “severe cash flow problems” for providers.
- Recommendation 4: Urgent examination of the reporting requirements on providers to reduce the bureaucratic burden on the voluntary sector and the desirability of harmonising with other voluntary sector funders.
- Recommendation 5: In response to the considerable administrative demands placed on providers, including information technology, consideration be given to providing funding aimed at increasing administrative, management and financial resources in the voluntary sector providers.
- Recommendation 6: Consideration of how to fund “other work carried out by many advice providers” that falls outside of the current fixed fee regime. This was later widened (at the suggestion of the ASA’s Policy Advisory Group²⁶) to include consideration of the demand for legal services arising from the “malfunction of Government services (e.g. failure to accurately process or promptly pay benefits claims)”.
- Recommendations 7 and 8: In response to a concern on the impact of establishing a CLAC or a CLAN on other funding streams in an area, these two recommendations are that steps should be taken to monitor this impact and also the impact of the establishment of CLAC/Ns on local advice providers, including those who are not part of the CLAC/N contract.
- Recommendation 9: Action be taken to encourage and support local voluntary sector organisations in shaping local CLAC/Ns, to reflect that many have a good knowledge of local communities’ needs and of existing advice provision.

In March 2010 the Local Government Association (LGA) published research it had commissioned from Tribal Group to provide a better understanding of the implications for local authorities of proceeding with a CLAC or CLAN.²⁷ In particular, the research sought to clarify:

- The options available to local authorities who wish to make changes to the current provision of advice in their area and the impact they have on advice providers.
- Key lessons for local authorities that can be drawn from experiences of developing CLAC/Ns.
- Any wider implications, risks and dilemmas for local authorities moving to commission other services where voluntary sector providers currently play a prominent role.

Key findings from the research included:

- Competitive tendering is not the only option available to local authorities to comply with EU procurement regulations.
- Competitive tendering can be an appropriate funding mechanism where a council requires a significant improvement to the quality and integration of advice provision and previous approaches have not worked.

26) ASA: Advice Services Alliance.

27) Tribal Group: *Early lessons from changes to legal advice provision and funding – the local authority experience*. IDeA and LGA; March 2010.

- The LSC will only proceed with CLAC/Ns where authorities are on-board and councils can choose not to proceed.
- The risk to voluntary and community organisations/sector (VCO/VCS) may not be as great as reported.²⁸
- The longer-term sustainability of CLAC/Ns is not clear as contracts may not be sufficiently large to cover the number of cases that need to be dealt with and private providers may not be able to make sufficient, stable profit.
- The LSC's objectives differ from council objectives and do not include the need for generalist advice and legal advice for those above the threshold for legal aid. They are also not aligned to wider local government commitments to create an environment for a thriving third sector and increase volunteering.
- Voluntary and community organisations often find it difficult to collaborate within short timeframes as they face specific barriers such as separate funding streams and a lack of available capital to implement changes.

The Tribal report provided a number of recommendations, including that before deciding to develop a CLAC/N councils should:

- Assess current provision and the need for change so they can identify the overall objectives for making changes to advice provision.
- Evaluate all options fully, including a full risk analysis from all stakeholders' perspectives to ensure there is a strong, well thought through rationale behind the option and it best meets the overall objectives.
- Support VCOs to be able to bid competitively (and subsequently also support those that lose out in competitive tenders).

In practice, the establishment of CLACs and CLANs has been somewhat contentious²⁹. Some local authorities have determined it better to withdraw from negotiations with the LSC (e.g. Bristol, as evidenced in this study and Cornwall)³⁰ and many commentators from the voluntary sector and legal community³¹ consider that the model is damaged, if not fundamentally flawed³². Following a legal challenge led by the Law Society, an agreement was reached with the LSC that the number of CLACs or CLANs would be limited to ten³³ and the LSC has subsequently confirmed that there are no current plans for any more to be developed³⁴.

The various evaluations and reviews of the CLAC/N experience to date suggest that they appear to have largely fulfilled their tasks, as set out for them by the LSC, but that a significant number of questions remain, especially as to their impact on the local infrastructure of voluntary and community advice providers. Little, if any, information is available about those voluntary sector providers that were not included in successful tenders and the low numbers of voluntary sector providers (with no smaller, local, community-based organisations) included in existing CLAC/N partnerships suggests that this impact could be significant. The Ministry of Justice recommendations underline their concern about the operation of the CLAC/N model to date and the fact that there are no current plans to develop new CLACs or CLANs suggests that this model is unlikely to be continued. What might replace it, however, is not yet clear.

Onset of recession and cuts in public expenditure

Just as the Baring Foundation trustees began considering applications to the 2008 programme, the economy entered its decline, as a result of which advice agencies found themselves dealing with an increase in demand for their services. For example, Citizens

28) This finding is reported on page IV of the report: "The risk to voluntary and community organisations/sector (VCO/VCS) may not be as great as reported as they should be in a highly competitive position if they can demonstrate an ability to work with other organisations. Also, the risk is reduced if commissioners understand the full range of services VCOs provide and ensure these are taken into account in the commissioning process." However, no evidence was presented in the report to substantiate this or on the impact on voluntary sector advice agencies that were not successful in the bidding process.

29) For a summary of the arguments against CLACs and CLANs see: Matthew Smerdon; *Rights with Meaning*; Baring Foundation, October 2009.

30) See N Smythe, K Mundy & K Curley; *Cornwall's Community Advice Network: a case study*; NAVCA, Cornwall County Council and Citizen's Advice Bureau; February 2009.

31) For instance, see S Hynes, Director of the Law Centres Federation in *Legal Action*, February 2007.

32) See, for instance: <http://www.adviceuk.org.uk/news-and-campaigns/consultations/clac>

33) M Smerdon, 2009 page 12.

34) Information provided by the LSC to the author.

Advice Bureaux in England and Wales reported significant increases in daily enquiries relating to redundancy and mortgage and secured loan arrears problems. This led some in the advice sector to refer to the situation being faced as somewhat of a “perfect storm.”³⁵ However, the storm was about to get worse. In May 2010 the Chancellor of the Exchequer set out savings of £6.2 billion in public sector spending and the Comprehensive Spending Review of October 2010 identified further cuts. As Sir Stuart Etherington, Chief Executive of NCVO, points out in a recent letter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, it is difficult to put a precise figure on the totality of the cuts affecting the voluntary sector, but:

“... some estimates have suggested that we are looking at somewhere between £3.2 billion and £5.1 billion. This is a substantial proportion of the sector’s income from the state (a total of 12.8 billion, only 2% of overall Government spending). In some areas, the voluntary and community sector has been protected from blanket cuts but in others the sector is suffering disproportionately from the 26% cut to local authority spending.”³⁶

The letter also explained that “the impact of the cuts is compounded by the fact that giving remains £700m below pre-recession levels; the end of transitional relief on Gift Aid in April 2011 will cost the sector at least £100m; and the increase in the main rate of VAT to 20% will cost the sector an estimated additional £150m per year.”

There are many stories in the press and elsewhere on the impact of these cuts on the voluntary sector and the extent to which they are already undermining the capacity of local voluntary and community organisations. One example is from Croydon Council which, in July 2010 agreed a restructuring of its ‘third sector funding programme’ that involved cuts of over 60% (subsequently suspended and currently subject to consultation). The impact assessment in the Council paper that proposed the cuts explained:

“The scope for the Council to enter into future funding commitments is now constrained by the new financial realities set out in the recent national emergency budget announcements for the public sector, the in-year savings targets that each local authority is required to deliver, and significant and sustained downward pressure on public sector budgets projected for the next few years.

... The current existing corporate fund supports 47 organisations of which 41 are not recommended for funding.”³⁷

Whilst the Croydon example may be towards the extreme end of the spectrum and has yet to run to a conclusion, it is clear that the impact of public expenditure cuts on local voluntary sector organisations will be significant and possibly severe. It is argued elsewhere that such cuts will have profound implications for the ability of civil and social action – with third sector organisations at its heart – to operate effectively and deliver for people and communities.³⁸ One of the interviewees in this study summed up the situation clearly: there has been a change from “expand and improve” services to “protect and survive”.

The Big Society

The ‘Big Society’ could be described as a framework that seeks to guide and direct government intervention at the local level, underpinned by a desire to facilitate greater responsibility and action locally, rather than dictated by government from above:

“The truth is that we need a government that actually helps to build up the Big Society. This means a whole new approach to government and governing. For a long time the way government has worked – top-down, top-heavy, controlling – has frequently had the effect of sapping responsibility, local innovation and civic action.

35) See *Rights with Meaning*; Baring Foundation, page 13.

36) Sir Stuart Etherington, Chief Executive of NCVO, in a letter to George Osborne, Chancellor of the Exchequer, 9th March 2011.

37) Croydon Council Cabinet report 12 July 2010: *Stronger Communities Fund 2010-14*.

38) See, for instance, Hilary Barnard: *Big Society – Cuts and consequences. A think piece*. Centre for Charity Effectiveness, Cass Business School, November 2010.

*... we need to turn government completely on its head. The rule of this government should be this: If it unleashes community engagement – we should do it. If it crushes it – we shouldn't.*³⁹

In the speech from which the above quotation was drawn, the Prime Minister identified “three big strands of the Big Society agenda”:

1. Social action – the Big Society will be dependent upon the actions of millions of people giving their time, effort and money and the government will need to foster and support a new culture of voluntarism, philanthropy and social action;
2. Public service reform – getting rid of centralised bureaucracy and opening up the provision of public services (to charities, social enterprises and private companies);
3. Community empowerment – “neighbourhoods who are in charge of their own destiny”.

There are clear tensions within this vision – for instance, opening up public services to be provided by private companies does not necessarily facilitate community empowerment – but, as presented by the Prime Minister, the overriding dynamic is to bring decision making and service delivery down to a more local level, both informed more by the needs of local people and met more by their own actions and involvement. Opening up public service provision, for instance, is in order to obtain “innovation, diversity and responsiveness to public need”, not simply to obtain a cheaper supply. Thus, a measure of whether government policy is being effective should be whether it supports the infrastructure of community organisations on which the Big Society must surely depend. If that infrastructure is undermined by a loss (or reduced effectiveness) of community based organisations it will be impossible to achieve the Prime Minister’s vision of “... the most radical shift in power from central government to neighbourhoods.”

Key points from the environmental scan

Drawing from the above, a few key points can be highlighted:

- The Government seeks “to foster and support a new culture of voluntarism, philanthropy and social action”. The objective is community empowerment: “neighbourhoods who are in charge of their own destiny”.
- Reductions in public expenditure are already causing a considerable loss of income for many community and voluntary sector organisations and this is likely to get worse before it gets better, with the result that many such organisations will find it hard to survive.
- The starting point for effective commissioning is to understand the needs of service users and communities that the public sector needs to address. This should involve consulting potential provider organisations, including those from the third sector and local experts, well in advance of commissioning new services, working with them to set priority outcomes for that service.
- The Government’s new approach to local partnerships and the localism agenda underline a shift towards adopting more of an ‘enabling’ rather than ‘top down’ role – helping people and communities do more for themselves and each other.
- Identifying need, commissioning public services and clarifying the role of the voluntary and community sector at the local level is likely to continue to be dictated by local strategies, developed in partnership.
- CLACs and CLANs are a ‘top-down’ approach to commissioning and have had limited success: they are unlikely to provide the model for the future delivery of community legal services. In particular, they appear to have undermined rather than reinforced the contribution of local community organisations. If a new model is to be developed, consistency would suggest that it is based on the principles of community engagement and empowerment highlighted in the above points.

39) Transcript of a speech by the Prime Minister on the Big Society, 19 July 2010.

A key question for this study – and the STVS generally – is whether collaboration provides a more effective way of responding to these circumstances. For the factors that matter to government, whether that is effective commissioning, understanding community needs, funding efficient and effective services or being more enabling: does collaboration add something distinctive and valuable? Similarly, for the advice sector: in order to speak with legitimacy and confidence in facing their challenges, does collaboration have a special role to play? The report explores these questions.

Section 3: Collaboration within the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) – a synopsis

In a recent publication, 'Thinking about collaboration', the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) refers to "unprecedented levels of policy-driven interest in collaborative working involving voluntary and community organisations".⁴⁰ There is certainly a vast amount of material, going back over two decades, that aims to assist those in the VCS considering collaboration, from the Charity Commission⁴¹, to NCVO⁴², to IVAR and beyond.⁴³ This interest is more than just a response to straitened times: it reflects a belief that it is possible to deliver better services more appropriately within the VCS by collaborating rather than competing:

"The period covered by this meta-analysis – 2000 to 2010 – coincided with an explosion of policy interest in the VCS, both as a provider of public services and as an agent of social and democratic renewal. A common thread running through public policy for the VCS, since the publication of the Treasury's 2002 Cross Cutting Review, has been the idea of collaborative working between VCOs (voluntary and community organisations) as a means of achieving greater efficiency, effectiveness and impact."⁴⁴

The IVAR report was a retrospective review of 70 separate research projects over a ten year period (2000 – 2010) which contained an element of collaboration between organisations. The definition of collaboration in this study was similar to that in other similar studies and reviews:

"For the purposes of this exercise we defined 'collaboration' broadly to include all kinds of non-competitive interactions across the boundaries of two or more voluntary organisations; from temporary cooperation, strategic alliances and consortia through to take-over and merger."⁴⁵

The synthesis suggested that there are six common challenges to which collaborative working is seen as a response:⁴⁵

- responding to the policy environment;
- achieving financial security;
- enhancing organisational capacity;
- developing organisational structures;
- improving service provision;
- influencing policy.

Each of the various studies has identified that there are, however, problems and challenges related to collaborating itself. The IVAR synthesis summarised these as:⁴⁷

- dealing with difference;
- protecting organisational identity and niche;
- balancing individual and collective interests;
- developing appropriate leadership;
- developing appropriate governance structures;
- securing resources and organisational capacity for the collaboration;
- developing a shared understanding of the purpose of the collaboration.

40) *Thinking about collaboration: a 10-year research synthesis*: IVAR March 2011.

41) See: <http://www.charitycommission.gov.uk/Publications/cc34.aspx>

42) See: <http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/advice-support/collaborative-working>

43) For instance, BASSAC: <http://www.bassac.org.uk/our-programmes/collaboration> and <http://collaborate2-hact.org.uk/index.php>

44) IVAR March 2011, page 2.

45) IVAR March 2011, page 8.

46) IVAR March 2011, page 11.

47) IVAR March 2011, page 19.

In a publication from its (then) Collaborative Working Unit, the NCVO also identified risks related to such collaborations, including:⁴⁸

- outcomes do not justify the time and resources invested;
- loss of flexibility in working practices;
- loss of autonomy;
- cultural mismatch between organisations;
- mission drift;
- damage to organisation if the collaboration is unsuccessful.

Nevertheless, virtually all studies and advice underline the potential benefits of collaboration and several provide evidence of how these benefits are achieved in practice, along with guidance for improving the chances of success.⁴⁹ The BASSAC study, *Sharing Without Merging*⁵⁰, which provided in 2005 “a wide review of current and potential approaches to collaborative working in the UK’s voluntary and community sector especially as it relates to long-term collaboration, sharing back office supports and infrastructure”, identified a number of lessons learnt from their study:

1. Successful collaboration – however formal or informal – requires a willingness to innovate, address change and manage risk.
2. Each group of collaborative organisations had to achieve a level of collaboration that worked for them. This level varied according to the individual culture and needs of the organisation and its clients.
3. There has to be a high level of trust within any partnership model. There must be open communication, honesty and inclusivity.
4. Participating has to be voluntary and it can be helpful if partners are able to select the components that they wish to collaborate on within the partnership.
5. It should be a true partnership with all partners co-owning the structure, processes and outcomes.
6. Interviewees reported that they all learned more and achieved more because of collaboration, which allowed them to access more skills than originally existed within their organisation.
7. It is important that each organisation achieves its own ends within the partnership whilst maintaining organisational integrity and brand.
8. To be successful, the collaboration requires a defined level of commitment and involvement and partners must meet this requirement.
9. There has to be a well-defined structure and process but not at the expense of creativity, innovative solutions and implementation.
10. If the structure, culture and process is reflective of the needs of the whole collaborative group then each reported greater outcomes than when they worked in isolation.

In 2009 Advice Services Alliance (ASA) published *Sharing your toys: Advice Agencies working together*⁵¹. Based on interviews with 20 people from 16 different collaborations, this covered similar ground to previous studies, but with the particular intention of building upon a general understanding of collaboration, the identification of those issues that are specific to the advice sector. The report concluded that there was clear evidence that partnerships between advice agencies can and do work and interviewees were generally

48) *Collaborative Working: Partnership between voluntary organisations* NCVO Collaborative Working Unit March 2007
49) See p.20 however, for reference to Barry Knight in Alliance Magazine, March 2001 for a more qualified view of the benefits of collaboration.

50) *Sharing without merging: A review of collaborative working and sharing back office support in the voluntary and community sector.* BASSAC 2005.

51) *Sharing your toys: Advice Agencies working together.* ASA April 2009.

enthusiastic about what their partnerships had achieved in improving services to clients and relationships between agencies. They did, however, identify a number of issues that are particularly related to the advice sector, reflecting:

- The nature of the sector
- The different kinds of advice being provided
- The wider activities carried out by advice agencies
- The funding rules under which advice agencies operate
- Specific issues to do with providing advice
- Specific delivery problems

For instance, the report highlighted three specifically advice-related issues: referrals between agencies, confidentiality and quality. It concluded that the issue of referrals remains a large one for advice agencies. Interviewees identified cultural obstacles, capacity problems, conflicts of interest, eligibility problems and disagreements between agencies as to when referrals should take place. In terms of client confidentiality, problems were experienced in some partnerships, where advisers employed by different organisations were working closely together, causing confidentiality problems in relation to information being passed from one agency to another. Quality was reported as particularly difficult in the context of advice, where quality of service is much harder to assess, in the absence of a proper peer review system. Some interviewees expressed concern about the quality of the advisers employed by their partners and the fact that the General Quality Mark does not guarantee the quality of advice.

In spite of these issues, the report concluded that none of the problems identified had proved to be insuperable - and that most were only mentioned by a few of the interviewees. Many of the partnerships had turned out to be relatively trouble-free and the final conclusion was that there is no reason why advice agencies should not continue to expand the nature and extent of their partnership working.

A recent addition to this library on collaboration, from New Philanthropy Capital, explores what it calls 'impact networks':⁵²

*"An impact network is a range of activities performed by different organisations that leads to a positive outcome. This can include organisations that see themselves as distinct. For example, achieving sustained employment for an ex-offender requires cooperation between organisations providing training and advice, offering work experience placements, campaigning for access to employment, and brokering jobs. The absence of one of these activities can reduce the chance of success, while duplicating activities in the network can waste resources."*⁵³

In other words: achieving a greater impact through collaboration. However, by looking at the subject from the perspective of organisations combining together to improve impact, some new and interesting perspectives are facilitated. The report argues that understanding and working within an impact network can boost effectiveness as there will be better links between activities, gaps in activities can be identified and addressed and resources can be allocated to avoid duplication and waste. Charities can use the impact network to develop a common strategy for achieving a desired outcome, and to agree responsibilities for delivery of the activities needed. The process can clarify the role of different organisations and activities in the network and enable organisations to focus efforts where they will be most effective. Importantly, the report also underlines the role that funders and commissioners can make in ensuring the success of such networks and the particular contribution that larger voluntary organisations can play.

Alliance Magazine ('the leading magazine for philanthropy and social investment worldwide') focussed on collaboration in its March 2011 issue. Guest editor, Barry Knight, provided a qualified view of the benefits of collaboration in his editorial article. He suggested that there are situations in which collaboration is vital, but others where it is not and that the difference is the complexity of the problem to be solved and whether

52) *Impact Networks: Charities working together to improve outcomes*. New Philanthropy Capital February 2011.

53) NPC 2011, page 3.

collaboration is intrinsic to its solution. He concluded that "A suitable candidate for collaboration is a chronic problem, embedded in systems or structures that requires different interventions from different organisations to deal with it". Knight argues that collaboration is a question of relative costs and benefits, with the central question: "do the costs exceed the benefits?". These costs and benefits, he suggests, occur at three main levels: the individual (how it impinges on their work); the organisational (how it enhances or distorts its work); and the level of the field (the impact on the problem to be solved). Knight's analysis and the NPC concept of impact networks both provide a useful framework within which to consider the results of this study.

Section 4: What does this study tell us?

In reporting the findings of this study it is necessary to start with a word of caution. It is a limited study, based on interviews with nine key actors, supplemented with documentary evidence from three successful collaborations: it may be said, therefore, that the opinions expressed are those of 'believers'. There is little hard information or data available that allows a more objective assessment, particularly of the outcomes of collaboration for the client. However, it is possible to consider the evidence and views presented, subject to this qualification, and make a judgement on whether they are rational and believable.

We will look at what was obtained from the evidence under the following headings:

1. The benefits of collaboration
2. Challenges and risks
3. What facilitates a successful collaboration?

1. Benefits of collaboration

A very strong picture was presented from each of the areas within this study that collaboration has brought significant benefits. In the words of one of the local authority representatives:

"I think they [the benefits] are manifest – if we hadn't entered into this relationship as we have I don't think we would be in the position to have the conversations we are having now around recommissioning services." LB(NCC)

Quotes used in the report have been attributed by use of initials, along with the initials of the organisation that the individual represents:

Avon:

- HC(BCC): Hywel Caddy, Bristol City Council
- BS(AN): Ben Sansum, Advice Network

Coventry:

- SB(CLC): Sue Bent, Coventry Law Centre
- CG(CCAB): Charley Gibbons, Coventry CAB
- SL(CCC): Shokat Lal, Coventry City Council

Nottingham:

- CA(CAC): Clare Ashton, Clifton Advice Centre
- LB(NCC): Lisa Black, Nottingham City Council
- CW(NLC): Cheryl Weston, Nottingham Law Centre

AdviceUK:

- SJ(AUK): Simon Johnson, AdviceUK

- **IMPROVED RELATIONSHIP WITH LOCAL/STRATEGIC AUTHORITY**

The role of the local authority has been very important to the perceived success of each of these collaborations and they need to be seen as collaborations that include the local authority, rather than collaborations solely within the VCS. Whilst the local authority was important in each case as a funder/commissioner, it would appear that their role as a strategic authority has been arguably even more important.

"It has given us a greater understanding of the issues that advice agencies face – how we can work more effectively with them to provide an effective, localised

service – there is no question of any other organisation coming in and making the services as accessible as they do.” HC(BCC)

“So there’s been a lot more responsiveness in terms of commissioning and equally it has enabled us to sit down and talk– with absolute openness and honesty – about the difficulties that the authority and advice sector are finding themselves in because of the financial situation. Two or three years ago it would have been very different – in fact, it probably wouldn’t have happened.” LB(NCC)

“We want to be good commissioners, but we’ve got to recognise that the providers know the service better than we do – in particular, that grass roots level understanding. I’m not saying they are perfect, but they are working towards a strategic direction that will give much clearer outcomes, which will provide clarity of objectives and they have really given us that within our strategic review.” SL(CCC)

This improved relationship, however, has taken time and commitment on both sides to make it work:

“Going through the process has taken a fair amount of work to explain to and persuade others in the Council (officers and members) – they are not immersed in it in the way that I am.” HC(BCC)

Collaborations that include agencies that are rooted in the community are perceived as offering a more holistic service that links with other aspects of community support, providing mutually reinforcing benefits. This, it was argued, facilitates an approach that is more preventative, dealing with causes of problems and thus reducing future demand. The ‘systems thinking’ approach⁵⁴, led by AUK, underlines this, illustrating the extent to which the failure to deal effectively with issues at an early stage can – and does – lead to more demand for advice services ‘down the line’.

The picture obtained from interviewees is one of the collaborating agencies and local authorities working together to identify needs and to determine how best to respond to them.

“Advice Nottingham as a consortium & Nottingham City Council as a commissioner of services have an absolute understanding of what the needs are for the city. The advice sector is helping to shape how that would be delivered – which is entirely different from old contractual arrangements where we would say ‘we have this amount of money and we want that delivering there and this is how we expect you to deliver it’”. LB(NCC)

A practical example of this can be seen in the current pilot between Nottingham City Council, AdviceUK and two independent advice services, which seeks to identify the systemic issues that affect the efficient management of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit cases in the city. Drawing on a ‘systems thinking’ analysis and the concept of ‘failure demand,’⁵⁵ pilot participants explore practical examples to identify why the individual concerned needs advice, whether it would have been possible to have eliminated this demand or dealt with it earlier by a more effective treatment of the case and how best to respond jointly to ensure the most effective resolution of the issue. This collaborative process is both a contributor to and result of the increased trust as a result of the collaboration and lessons are already being drawn that will potentially make significant improvements to the system of determining and awarding benefits.

This picture of the local authority working together with the advice agencies to understand local needs and agree how best to respond was reflected in each of the areas. In Bristol, one of the reasons cited for this was that collaboration has led to a greater consistency in data collection and reporting: from April 2010 all of the agencies involved in that collaboration began collecting and reporting data in the same, agreed way. Over a number of years the local authority had worked with ACFA and the Advice Network and developed a good

54) See: *It’s the system, stupid: Radically rethinking advice*. AdviceUK 2008.

55) ‘Failure demand’: the demand for advice created by the failure of public services to handle decisions about benefit eligibility effectively first time around.

relationship: they felt confident that the Network understood the needs of the diverse communities in their area.

“We get a more complete advice service – and we’re able now to have a common form of measuring outputs for advice across all deliverers.” HC(BCC)

The local authority representative from Coventry underlined that whilst the collaboration has been extremely productive, they have had to ensure that other organisations that are not part of the collaboration are not left out in the cold:

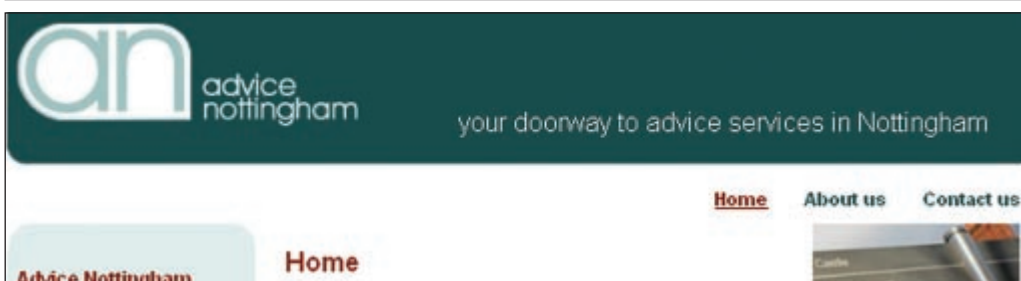
“We mustn’t lose sight of those organisations who are currently not part of the collaboration: there could be a whole range of reasons why they are not – so maybe it’s too big an ask at this stage for ASC to bring every organisation together... As a local authority we’ve got a duty to every single organisation.” SL(CCC)

Nevertheless, he saw a continuing and pressing need to address the way services are commissioned and delivered:

“We have to fundamentally and radically change the way we are providing our services. We have no choice, we’re on a burning platform in terms of budget cuts and the pace technology is moving... There needs to be more joining up – it’s about that pathway, that customer journey... We need to go from a position of transactional change to true transformational change and you can only do that if every single part is involved – it’s important now more than ever, that we do that. I feel that Coventry is laying the foundations and if organisations like ASC continue to be effective, I think we’ll get there.” SL(CCC)

- **BUILDING THE CAPACITY OF THE SECTOR**

Strengthening service delivery by building the capacity of the advice sector was considered a major benefit in each of the areas. Within this, **improved communications** was considered to be an important facilitating factor – involving communication between separate delivery agencies, between those agencies and the local authority and also with those who seek advice services. Coventry and Avon each have a dedicated website that assists members of the public seeking to access advice, as well as members wishing to share or access the latest information online, and Nottingham will shortly be following suit:



Improving referral arrangements between advice agencies, so that clients can access the assistance they need in the right way at the right time, is seen as a valuable way of improving services to clients. Historically, it was argued, this had been restricted not only by concerns over competition, but also by having inadequate arrangements and systems to make referrals work effectively. For example, referrals between agencies are now almost always made online in Coventry:

“Outcomes for service users have been enhanced through the referral system. People are being handled in a better way – there’s more efficient passing between agencies and getting permission to share documents... and we’ve had some further development work done on it (the website) so that now people can access the referral area even if they are not a member of ASC.” SB(CLC)

Up to date **policies and procedures are shared** online:

“We had requests from smaller groups to help with policies and procedures, updating office manuals etc. We’ve used the small groups fund to buy good policies and procedures from larger agencies – and these are now online so that all of the AN members can download and use them” BS(AN)

Such organisational support is not only online: there are arrangements to provide **direct staff support**. In Nottingham an arrangement has been made where two of the larger agencies provide support to smaller agencies in the supervision of senior staff. Agencies also cooperate there to manage workload pressures: if one agency is overloaded at a particular time, clients are referred to another agency with the capacity to respond immediately.

“It’s beyond having a website – that got us to the point of signposting clients to agencies and then sorting out referrals to link clients up directly – but we’ve done work beyond that to look at the referral point of different types of case. We’re getting more consistency.” CG(CCAB)

“For some of smaller agencies the issue has been supervision of cases – good supervision drives up the quality – and they are now being supervised by staff in larger agencies. One of the benefits is that agencies who build up those relationships become more willing to obtain support with problem cases or other issues – so people are getting more accurate advice.” CW(NLC)

Each of the collaborations has arrangements for **shared training of staff** and some also for cooperating in **recruitment**. An example was also provided of an improved complaints procedure through support from other members of the collaboration.

“Being part of the collaboration has helped reduce a feeling of isolation for the smaller agencies. We share problems, ideas, developments – and this leads to developing services in a different way. We share in volunteer and staff training and policies. This has been of real value, especially now as there are all sorts of additional policies that you need. We have even had joint interviewing of new staff, where two agencies had vacancies at the same time. And there is a mutual supervision network in South Nottingham which is very positive.” CA(CAC)

“We’ve tried to strengthen quality by doing more training and I think we’re probably getting there... staff here (Coventry Law Centre) spend a lot of time supporting first year advice workers in other agencies... there’s a more positive spirit of trying to provide support across the board.” SB(CLC)

An important area of reported benefit is the capacity to agree **joint data recording and reporting**, so that an overall picture of demand and service provision can be obtained on an agreed basis. In Coventry this occurred alongside improvements to IT systems:

“Also with the Baring money we strengthened our IT systems. This was partly about strengthening the individual organisations, but it was also aimed at enhancing the

data that we were collecting jointly. Initially everyone thought they needed a new IT system, but our specialist concluded that it was better for them to keep the systems they already had but make them work properly. He managed to enhance them to collect the same data continuously across the partnership. We now have five years worth of data and have been able to use that as a powerful argument that we're monitoring what we're doing and know whether we're meeting need or not."
SB(CLC)

In Bristol the collaboration has also facilitated considerable improvements in data recording and understanding demand:

"We've gone from [the local authority] not really having a very clear understanding of what they're funding to having a clear picture of the numbers – as we've unified the counting. So we have a better information base. We spent a lot of time working with the agencies to get common counting system... it has been a huge amount of work. But now we can demonstrate the benefit of the core funding – coming not only from the case worker, but the receptionist and others, too."
BS(AN)

It was argued that **innovation** is facilitated by collaboration, for instance:

"We're looking at the way to get the message out to the public – joint publicity, the website, jointly developing services to respond in a different way to the need. For example, we're going to put information sheets on the website and, looking to the future, we're thinking about Skype and video conferencing – different ways of doing things. As a group we're more likely to be able to respond to these opportunities as we can put a couple of people onto it, to investigate and respond to us all. The challenge will be: how can we deliver services to an increasing number of people with decreasing resources?" CW(NLC)

"There has been a real sharing of best practice and exchanging ideas and you can see the desire that people want to work together and actually avoid the duplication, so that the individual advice services journey is as simple and easy as possible." SL(CCC)

Collaboration is reported to have improved opportunities to **access funding** streams and opportunities, especially for the smaller, community based agencies. It is argued that it has led to a more rational approach to funding applications, with agreement between agencies about which are best to proceed with particular applications, combining in joint bids where appropriate.

"We've been able to identify new funding opportunities and agree who's best to go for them and whether to go together and, if so, in what groupings. Different agencies have taken the lead on different applications. This has shared out the load and made the applications more appropriate. This has been especially useful for smaller agencies and has reduced their workload." CW(NLC)

"We've submitted joint bids – and have been able to reflect local need better. It allows us to negotiate with key funders – we're so much stronger working together. And collaborating like this appeals to the Council because they only have to go through one organisation, rather than several." CA(CAC)

"If you look at Advice Nottingham three years ago – whilst they all understood the business, when funding opportunities came they would all apply at the same time independently, without an understanding of who might best fit the needs. But what AN does now is to look at it in the round and decide which is the most appropriate to go for it or lead a group bid." LB(NCC)

In this last reference, an example was provided of a recent opportunity under the Working Neighbourhood Fund to support training of volunteers in advice centres. The local authority lead officer explained that she challenged the network: *"You could spread this money between you and each agency get a little, but that won't achieve much. What about*

looking at whether a volunteer adviser training programme across the city might be a better approach?" As a result the CAB was selected by the network to lead in a bid because they already had a volunteer training programme and the capacity to expand it. They lead on the training but provide the trained volunteers to the whole of the network.

Interviewees also considered that collaboration provides a greater opportunity to **influence local and national policy**, partly because information on which the influencing is based is drawn from better and more comprehensive information. This derives both from the wider network of those involved and from the technical capacity provided by the websites and online sharing.

"We're able to pool evidence for social policy – to gather case studies together. We used to struggle with case studies – advisers have high case loads and are very busy, so it's difficult to ask someone to do that on top of their job. But now, if we're very busy we can approach other agencies if we need a case study. We've responded to consultations together. This doesn't stop individual responses, but gives us the benefit of replying with a unified voice. There are also benefits because we have to discuss with each other to decide what the joint stance should be. All this is supportive – you don't feel as if you're on your own." CW(NLC)

As the following example illustrates, this can have very practical implications:

"We've set up an online social policy reporting system – a secure web page with series of taxonomies for different subject areas. We did a benchmarking exercise with the 20 agencies that signed up to the Advice Network – the social policy people said they had no time and there was no easy way of collecting information centrally about individual clients that could be fed into consideration of wider policies – and no faith that anything would happen with the information collected. ACFA had in theory a social policy reporting system where people were meant to fill out evidence forms and send them in – but only two or three a year were received. The online system requires very little typing – no names or identification – just a series of drop down menus that makes it easy to report in some detail. This went live at the end of September 2010 and is working steadily – we're doing presentations to teams to make sure everyone is using it. We've already found that it can help us to identify new issues arising – [a detailed example in relation to Home Choice allocations was provided] – as a result of which we were able to bring the problem to the local authority and get it dealt with." BS(AN)

The above example is from the Advice Network in Avon and they are also experimenting with an online approach to consultation responses – something that it is often extremely difficult for frontline agencies to find the time for. With this system the lead person in AN summarises the consultation document and produces a briefing document for others to respond to, using an online document management system that will allow those responding to see the original document and all prior comments/responses to the briefing. A similar approach is being trialled in Coventry.

2. Challenges and risks

It was clear from the interviews that there are many challenges and risks in setting up and running collaborations of the kind reported on here. As can be seen, they are not loose arrangements of convenience, but planned activities requiring a significant investment in time, money and trust. This section will look at what interviewees reported as the key challenges and risks they had to face to build their collaborations.

- **TIME**

Collaborations such as these take a long time to embed to the point where the advantages can be seen to outweigh the extra work involved and each of the collaborations has involved working together over a number of years. It has been a progressive development, requiring trust and leadership as well as financial and human resources. However, there was also some feeling that it could have progressed more speedily if properly understood and planned for, especially by freeing managers from some of their normal, day to day

responsibilities, in order to focus on developing the collaboration:

"You mustn't underestimate how long those things can take. The learning is that it has taken longer to get to where we are than it might have done if we had dedicated ourselves to it and taken people outside of their day jobs to start and influence this work, rather than add it on top." LB(NCC)

"There has been a long history of collaboration but it became more formalised in 2006 – previously it was intermittent. So, when Barings came along we were in much stronger position to respond... We spent a lot of time in 2006/07 to bring everyone together to build relationships – this is absolutely key, as at that time we couldn't have had such open and honest discussion that we can now." CA(CAC)

The major burden falls on managers and often this has required them simply to add to their already busy schedules:

"[There is a] huge amount of manager time needed – especially for the lead people from smaller agencies. But to a large extent this has been a personal cost to individual managers and trustees – they come in earlier and leave later. There's lots of work in sub-groups to develop aspects of work (e.g. business planning, commissioning, SROI⁵⁶) and inevitably there's only a small number of people with the expertise – so demands on them can be very high." CA(CAC)

Although the last quote emphasised the impact on smaller agencies, the picture across the board was that all managers involved had to commit significant time, with perhaps the greatest additional commitment falling on those from the larger agencies who were taking a lead in the developing the collaboration. However, the smaller agencies have less capacity to respond to additional demands, particularly as resources became tighter and they were working harder to maintain and protect their services:

"Everyone's so busy there's an exhaustion there's a weariness – they're just hoping to survive." BS(AN)

However, as the same person went on to observe, collaborating is seen as an important way to aid that survival and not as a distraction:

"... but people are now reluctant to not be involved because they can see the positive impact."

Further, he feels there is a question over whether it is the collaboration per se that has required the extra time or the difficult environment for agencies:

"... and I feel that without the Advice Network they would actually have had to commit more time over past few years because of the scale of changes."

There is also the question of time for local authority officers and this has to be found against considerable competing demands and potentially organisational responsibilities that do not match the demands and responsibilities of the advice services agencies:

"I really do take the point about the time taken to develop this. The problem is that in the local authority there are many competing demands and priorities. We don't have a dedicated advice services resource or a unit or anybody who's working on [advice services] specifically and it's complex in terms of gathering the baseline information, so inevitably there's a balance to be struck." SL(CCC)

- **COST**

A lot of money has been put into the collaborations considered here – from the Baring Foundation, but also from the BIG Lottery Fund, Lloyds TSB Foundation, CapacityBuilders, Neighbourhood Renewal Fund and others. However, it is not easy to determine how much of this money should be considered funding to facilitate collaboration and how much to

56) SROI: Social Return on Investment.

improve service delivery and/or strengthen individual organisations, with collaboration as one method to achieve this. This is an important consideration as it is possible that funds put into similar service and organisational development improvements (e.g. training, IT, communications) to individual organisations may have cost more and achieved less than funding through a collaboration. Take, for instance, the improvement of IT systems in Coventry, mentioned above. The organisations involved believed that they needed new IT systems to improve record keeping, monitoring and activity reporting. By working with a number of agencies together, a specialist employed by Advice Services Coventry was able to recommend improvements in the use of the existing system in each agency. No new systems were purchased but training was provided to ensure that existing systems were used to their potential. Thus, more was achieved for less.

However, a degree of caution is also required in highlighting potential savings from collaboration. It is sometimes argued that sharing back office functions such as finance, purchasing and HR will inevitably lead to reduced costs.⁵⁷ This will not always be the case as often the smaller, community based organisations are running on a minimal budget for such things, spending too little rather than too much on the likes of financial administration, training and HR services. Also, it is not always easy to negotiate joint purchasing arrangements as organisations such as the Citizens Advice Bureau have national purchasing arrangements separate from local collaborations and without the larger organisations participating, the local collaborations may find it hard to negotiate preferential rates. There is also a constraint for collaborations that are not constituted independently and thus able to arrange the purchasing through one organisation:

"We thought we might be able to coordinate training and purchases but we learnt that unless we constituted no-one wanted to do us any deals on purchasing."
SB (CLC)

"We still weren't big enough to have any buying power to get reduced rates. And anyway, Age UK and CAB are part of larger federations that were already doing that on their behalf." CG(CCAB)

A recent confidential exercise for Advice Services Coventry examined the cost structure of the participating agencies and looked at the potential for reducing 'back office' costs. This found that office running costs averaged just 9% of total costs, within a range of 6-16%. It was found that the organisations were already 'lean and mean' and that there was little opportunity for significant savings through joint purchasing or the like.⁵⁸

Also in Coventry, it was argued that cost savings arise from collaborating:

"The fact that the Law Centre has an effective partnership with first tier advice agencies in the community saves us costs. If we didn't have people who prepare cases and do the groundwork in the way that they do, we would have to spend more on doing the preparatory work before we could get on to the legal stuff. We're not using legal aid money to do non-legal work because we have lots of other partners who get everything ready for us. The referral system we have means in the main that we don't duplicate." SB(CLC)

In order to obtain an indication of the additional costs arising specifically from collaboration, AdviceUK and Advice Nottingham analysed the time spent by members in Nottingham involved in recent collaborative projects. This analysis identified the specific costs of collaborating, excluding those which would normally be incurred in service development or organisational strengthening. This calculation produced a median monthly cost of £2,050. These would not appear unduly high costs in relation to the benefits indicated above.

- **LEADERSHIP, TRUST AND CONFIDENCE**

Leadership stands out as an important element in obtaining a successful collaboration and the corollary of this is that there has to be the development of trust – a willingness to

57) See for example Annex C of *Study of legal advice at local level: Implementation plan*. Ministry of Justice September 2009.

58) *Investigation into the funding and delivery of advice services in Coventry City*. Confidential report for Advice Services Coventry; 2010.

accept that working collectively enhances rather than undermines the position of each organisation separately. Together these facilitate a greater confidence in the collaboration as a whole:

“Leadership is very important – it’s essential because if you don’t have it, you will continue to have a scatter gun approach ... From a commissioning or funder’s point of view, we require strong and clear leadership and in Coventry we’ve seen that: through ASC that leadership is there.” SL(CCC)

“We spent a lot of time in 2006/07 to bring everyone together to build relationships – this was absolutely key – at that time we couldn’t have such an open and honest discussion as we can have now. Some of the smaller organisations had a fear of being taken over by the larger... we did a lot of work to make sure everyone understood and supported what we were doing. CA(CAC)

Turning mistrust and suspicion into trust was mentioned as a factor in each of the areas:

“We started out with a degree of mistrust as in effect everyone was competing for funding – the pot has always been small compared to need. So it was a trust building process – a lot of this was based on key individuals – personalities are absolutely key.” BS(AN)

“There was a fear of being taken over for the smaller organisations. A fear that contracts would not be renewed and that you were exposing yourself... there was a real fear that your base could be removed and service lost.” CA(CAC)

“Partnership working does require trust and confidence. When the two agencies started to discuss the possibility of a joint tender for an LSC contract, the chief officers had not worked together before, and so were careful in keeping options open, considering risk carefully. Whilst this is healthy, the more trust develops, the more a partnership is able to consider more centrally client and service needs.” CG(CCAB)

The role of AdviceUK as an external facilitator was considered highly valuable – as a specialist resource, an honest broker and leader:

“When I look at what the Baring Foundation is funding to help with the collaboration, the fact that we have someone like Simon [AdviceUK] to support us has been invaluable – he has a wider knowledge from around the country and brings that to the meetings and provides an independent view.” CA(CAC)

“To move that forward AdviceUK were fantastic – it meant we were able to get some independent facilitation about roles and terms of reference and expectations and the like. That external resource was key because it brought a degree of independence – also having their external view of the world brought some peer challenge because they are doing work across the country... it has been invaluable.” LB(NCC)

Similarly, Simon Johnson, of AdviceUK felt that the external facilitator can provide objectivity and help address difficult questions:

“... in the same way as any kind of change process, it’s quite useful to have an external input – it helps to provide some objectivity and to address any difficult questions. If the network has a clear vision, understands how to get there and has the expertise to do the planning then they’re well on their way – but if those are not all there, then there’s a need for a catalyst to move things forward.” SJ(AUK)

Another factor that appears to be important in facilitating trust between agencies, especially in obtaining the trust of the smaller, community based ones, is for those who are driving the collaboration – inevitably the larger organisations – to be able to demonstrate that collaborating is about protecting funding and services for those in need, not about protecting their own organisation.

"Because we were doing most of the work [in the collaboration], there was a massive amount of suspicion to overcome – concern that this was just a vehicle for us to take over the world – so I had to go out of my way to do lots of work that clearly wouldn't help the Law Centre itself, to show the bigger picture." SB(CLC)

This growth in trust, it was argued, has led to a change in culture:

"Because of building trust we have had a change of culture – we're still doing our work locally, but we're seeing the wider picture. It's about providing a service to the community." CA(CAC)

Another important leadership issue is to keep everyone on board throughout an extended process, when there are many other competing – and often urgent – demands. This applies at the level of the lead/larger/specialist agencies keeping on board the smaller/community based ones and also for trustees and other staff within each organisation to be brought into the process, rather than keeping it only within the senior management:

"... people were uncertain about the consequences. So we always had an open policy (when you're smaller this is easier). We have a management meeting including trustees almost every month. Staff are always invited, consulted and kept up to date. We've had to build up trust within our own staff. We have had some cynicism, but overall it's been positive – they can certainly see benefits." CA(CAC)

"Within agencies there are real challenges – what tends to happen is that [senior] individuals get very involved in collaboration and commit to it, but don't always communicate that to the trustees or other staff. This means there is a variable level of understanding of what the shared agenda is, the nature of collaboration and the benefits – as a result there can be a variable level of commitment." SJ(AUK)

- **THE FUNDING ENVIRONMENT**

The funding environment in which the collaboration develops is relevant. The earlier period for these collaborations was largely characterised by growth, or at least reasonably secure budgets. In such circumstances, the challenge is how to agree to bid for additional funds. This strengthens the possibility of demonstrating that all can benefit from the collaboration. However, in a time of cuts, the challenge becomes that someone is going to lose out – possibly everyone, but some more than others. There is, as one interviewee explained, a difficulty in coming to terms with the change from an "expand and improve" to a "protect and survive" culture.

"If we hadn't had three years of additional funding coming in that was used to strengthen everyone it would have been hard to build up the trust. If we had come together as a partnership in a shrinking funding situation, purely with an agenda of making better use of either the money we've got, or a reduced pot, then yes, that would have been very difficult. You'd go straight into the place where we are now and can we really be brave enough to say that the service is more important than the individual organisations?" SB(CLC)

- **GOVERNANCE**

The internal arrangements and governance of the collaboration are undoubtedly a challenge. Decision making within voluntary and community sector organisations can be slow at the best of times, but when collaboration involves several organisations of different sizes and capacities, the size of the challenge can be increased significantly.

"I think that a key risk is of drift because of poor decision making processes. If you're a dynamic organisation then there is a risk in this being compromised. So far I've not seen this as a problem from this experience, but I have previously." SJ(AUK)

In Nottingham and Bristol this has been addressed by establishing a separate organisational identity for the collaboration, with its own governance arrangements. In Coventry a separately constituted body has not been established, partly because an overarching

structure has been established that is planned to encompass the advice services collaboration alongside other VCS activity.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, as with Avon and Nottingham, the participating agencies have been involved in a lot of joint work and meetings to ensure that the collaboration can make decisions in a timely fashion and, in particular, respond to opportunities as they arise.

Having a separate governance structure has allowed Advice Nottingham to bring in external expertise, something that was considered to have been very useful:

"In Advice Nottingham we have on the Board a representative from each of the seven agencies, plus a Secretary (in fact from one of the agencies, but this is not essential), plus a Treasurer, plus 4-5 independent Trustees (including a Chair and Vice Chair). Representatives from the advice agencies can be a Trustee or a manager. And we also allow 'stand-ins' at meetings, if the nominated rep can't make it. We have a Trustee Board and Managers' Meetings. It took a long time to sort out." CA(CAC)

There is also a challenge – particularly where a separate structure has been established for the collaboration – for it to remain focussed on the key tasks:

"One of main challenges is to remain focussed and effective and not to be seen as the place to go for anyone who wants something done but doesn't have time to do themselves. In practice we've had to be clear when agencies asked for help outside of what's reasonable." BS(AN)

The potential problem of the 'convoy issue' was raised – that is, the danger that the collaboration will be perceived (or will be in practice) only as good as the least able or organised of its members. Potentially this is especially an issue for the specialist agencies, where a lot of effort has been made over years to ensure demonstrably high standards, not only of service delivery, but also of recording, reporting, etc. In these collaborations, it appears to have been a driver for giving considerable attention to joint training, IT improvements, the development of common recording systems, referral arrangements, etc. There has been an awareness of the need – and investment of time and effort – to ensure that the collaborations should not be allowed to falter because of differences in size and capacity between agencies. Nonetheless, there remains a 'together we stand, together we fall' issue:

"There is clearly a risk of us all lashing ourselves together – if the local authority had decided to bring in external agencies to bid against us, would we have been able to continue operating as a consortium? There's always the risk that the local authority would decide against us, so we would all fail." BS(AN)

This is perhaps particularly important for the larger organisations involved, as their capacity to benefit from shared commissions will be influenced by the capacity of their smaller partners – in purely organisational terms 'going it alone' may be their most rational response, whereas collaboration may be more relevant in terms of meeting the needs of clients and the community most effectively.

• OUTCOMES

Measuring outcomes of advice services is complex and not easy to achieve for a variety of reasons. A recent report by **nef**⁶⁰ explored a number of case studies from Advice Services Coventry (ASC) to assess how advice services can be resourced to deliver better value for money. The report provides a detailed and extremely useful exploration of the subject that is particularly helpful as it draws on the experiences of one of the three collaborations under consideration.

59) "Here2Help" – a voluntary and community sector consortium that aims "to safeguard and grow high quality voluntary and community sector (VCS) service provision to local people through working with the local authority to co-design services and negotiate a pipeline of funding, and by tendering competitively for public service contracts via a range of channels".

60) *Outcomes in advice*. New Economics Foundation, July 2010.

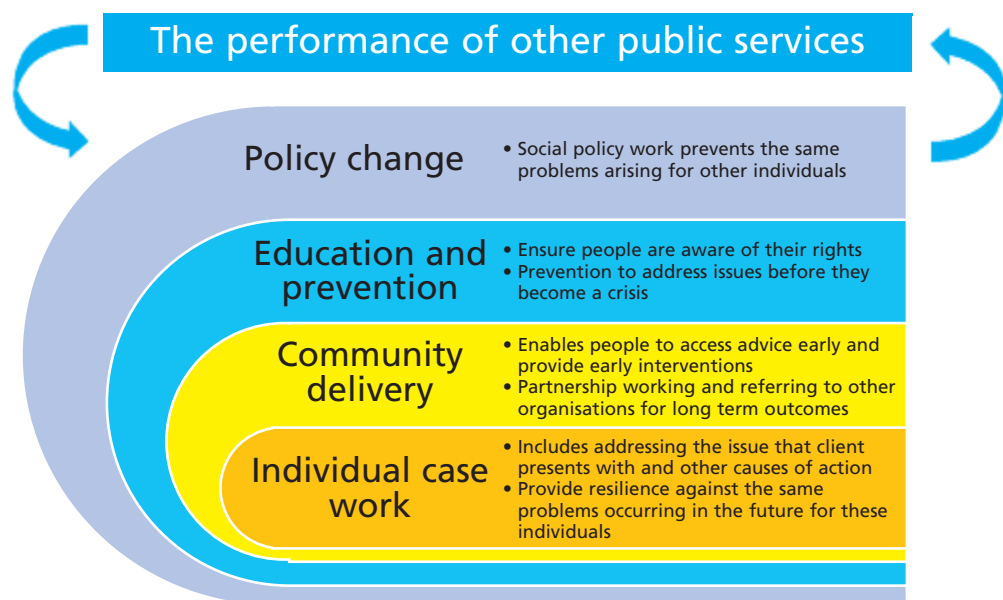
Highlighting that ASC is a partnership of a broad range of advice agencies covering both generalist and specialist advice, **nef** looked at outcomes⁶¹ for the individual, the community and also in areas of policy or law:

“Advice providers in Coventry, and Coventry City Council, both have objectives around reducing social exclusion. Whilst individual case work is important in achieving this it is only one aspect alongside preventative and education work that are all essential to achieving purpose and realising value for money.” (p2)

“There are often wide-ranging outcomes from the advice which affect other areas of the client’s life and also fit into local and national strategic priorities. These include improvements in health, worklessness, confidence and self esteem.” (p3)

Referencing a Baring Foundation report,⁶² **nef** include the diagram below to illustrate the different aspects of advice and how they link and interact with each other:

Figure 1. **Elements of advice**



In considering how advice agencies can measure their outcomes, the report observes:

“The outcomes that advice agencies contribute to are wide ranging and cut across many local partners’ strategic priorities. Yet these are not well reflected in the performance measures currently used by advice agencies – these are normally limited to the number of people accessing their services. This is a poor reflection of value. If the performance measurement framework is wrong, it won’t accurately demonstrate where organisations deliver most impact.” (p39)

The report concluded that ASC members contribute to a range of strategic priorities within Coventry and that investing in quality advice provision delivers cost savings across council budgets, enables vulnerable individuals to uphold their rights and prevents social exclusion.

Against this background it is perhaps not surprising that this study found that interviewees were not yet able to provide clear outcome measures, particularly for the service users. As one of the Coventry interviewees observed:

“No, we haven’t yet got a definitive way of measuring outcomes for service users – and that’s a problem.” SB(CLC)

61) The **nef** report described outcomes as the longer-term changes that advice agencies make in the world.
 62) Outcomes in advice: page 4.

However, this is not seen simply as a failure of the delivery organisations:

"[Is there adequate information on outcomes?] At the moment probably not, but that's not the fault of ASC. The local authority has required some information on outcomes but this has not previously been focussed enough – it has not been sufficiently strategic, not aligned sufficiently to the City Vision." SL(CCC)

There appears to be some progress in Bristol, but clearly still with some way to go:

"I think that advice services have got their heads around this [outcome measurement] somewhat – for example, in the Health Related Benefits programme, which is about keeping people out of hospital... it's only now that we have brought in effective KPIs we will be able to link the outputs to the outcomes but still the most effective way of monitoring is the qualitative way, through case studies." HC(BCC)

"We have agreed common counting for client numbers and in terms of financial successes, but more importantly, we have reached a point where the local authority and agencies are discussing their mutual understanding of the outcomes expected." BS(AN)

In Nottingham there was a pilot study of outcomes as part of the BIG Lottery funded project, Working Together for Advice: this has not yet reported, although it was suggested that some positive results appeared to be emerging. Following training conducted by **nef**, they are also interested in pursuing the SROI approach further.

The **nef** report underlines that it is inappropriate to try to measure outcomes for advice simply in terms of the direct impact on service users and the interviews suggest that the collaborations have facilitated the kind of contact between the VCS providers and local councils as strategic authorities and commissioners (if not the LSC) that has moved beyond the measuring 'units of advice', but there appears some way to go towards agreeing and achieving measurements that allow as part of a standard monitoring arrangement (as opposed to a SROI research study) a fuller appreciation of the outcomes achieved. This would appear to be a priority for future attention.

3. What facilitates collaboration?

This section draws on the previous two sections (on the benefits and challenges) in order to highlight aspects that are seen to have been important in facilitating these collaborations. There is an element of prioritisation in the order in which they are presented, but it is arguable that one conclusion to be drawn is that they are not an options list to select from: i.e. that having most, if not all, of the facilitating factors in place seems important in achieving successful collaborations, comparable to the examples in this study.

- **A CLEAR VISION**

The IVAR review of ten years of collaboration stressed the importance of collaborations having a shared and clear vision:

"Participants saw working towards a shared and over-arching vision as critical to the success of collaborative ventures. Identifying a vision of what could be achieved through collaboration – for example, improved services or greater policy influence – helped organisations, particularly those considering merger, to deal with their differences and move forward together. It could act as a reference point when making difficult decisions by reminding participants of the larger purpose of the collaboration."⁶³

The IVAR finding is replicated in this, smaller study. Having that vision – the underlying belief that there is a point to all of this work that more than rewards the effort involved – provides the fuel that drives involvement when resources and energy are low. Knight

63) *Thinking about collaboration*; IVAR: 2011 p30.

suggested that the costs and benefits of collaboration need to be considered for the individual, the organisation and the 'field' (of operation)⁶⁴. In the type of collaboration we have looked at in this piece of work, one conclusion appears to be that it has been the ability to create an achievable vision at the level of the field of operation (i.e. the delivery of effective and efficient advice services to all of those in need in the community) that has led to the commitment at the organisational and individual level. In other collaborations, particularly those that are responding to organisational threat rather than an opportunity at the field level, the vision may be different. For funders it will be important to establish what is the vision of the collaboration and at what level it operates: and, fundamentally, is it clear and shared enough to drive commitment?

- **LEADERSHIP, TRUST AND CONFIDENCE**

Collaborations of this kind require strong leadership. This leadership involves helping to create the vision referred to above and also building the necessary trust among partners that will facilitate realising the vision, giving the confidence that it is worth committing the time and energy. Trust is an important ingredient. These collaborations involve organisations of different sizes and capacities: there will inevitably be differential benefits, costs and contributions and if these are not to cause dissention and fragmentation, then all those involved must retain continuing confidence. It is clear from the experiences in Coventry just how much effort has been put into demonstrating to all agency partners what they have to gain by being inside the collaboration. It is unlikely in such ventures, however, that leadership will be singular and it may, at least in part, be from within the local authority (as is particularly the case in Nottingham in this study) or another statutory partner. Regardless of where it rests and whether it is one or more persons and organisations, one of the key tests for funders considering supporting collaborations is to establish that such leadership exists and the extent to which it is accepted by and representative of the partners.

- **TIME AND MONEY**

Perhaps the most striking observation is the considerable amount of time and financial investment that was required to achieve the successes that are now being realised. Each of the three collaborations has been operating over a number of years and a succession of funding has been obtained. It may not have been clear in 2005: in Bristol, when CapacityBuilders funding was obtained; in Coventry with Neighbourhood Renewal funding; or in Nottingham with a Lloyds TSB Foundation grant; where it would all lead, but looking back it seems very likely that these earlier initiatives have been fundamental in securing the foundations on which the present collaborations are built. There has been a steady progression in each area, with each step along the route building on the former. For funders this raises the interesting question of whether you are providing the funding that will one day be seen as one of the important early steps on which subsequent success is built, or whether your funds will be able to achieve more as a result of the prior investment of others. Either way, there is a need to be willing to play a part in a longer term investment.

- **AN ENGAGED STRATEGIC AUTHORITY**

One of the successes of the collaborations studied is the influence that they have exerted in the development and implementation of local strategy. They have engaged with their local strategic partners (principally through the local authority) to represent the needs of their clients and the communities in which they live. As a result they appear to have been more active in influencing their own destinies. This has been far from a one way street and it is arguable that one of the prerequisites for a successful collaboration of this kind is a truly engaged local/strategic authority. However, it is also arguable that it has been the effectiveness of the collaboration in presenting an effective focus that has facilitated this – for instance, not all parts of the VCS in the study areas had such well developed relationships with the local authorities as the advice organisations now do. In practice, of course, this will come down to individuals and individuals can move on. For funders seeking to invest in successful collaborations, it would seem appropriate to investigate the extent to which those collaborating are clearly tied in to their local strategies, with the appropriate support and encouragement of key (usually local authority) strategic partners. This is particularly important for the kinds of collaborations that have been investigated here, for

64) Knight: Alliance Magazine, March 2011.

they tend to be examples in which the local authority is 'inside' rather than 'outside' of the collaboration. The strength of this varies between locations, but it is almost certainly strongest in Nottingham, where it is hard to imagine what has been achieved without such a significant involvement from within the City Council.

- **EXTERNAL EXPERTISE AND FACILITATION**

It may not be the case in all collaborations, but the presence of the external expertise and facilitation of AdviceUK in two of these examples has clearly been an important factor in achieving the benefits that have been realised. The interviews demonstrated the extent to which AdviceUK's role was considered to be important, particularly in Nottingham. This is because of their technical expertise and capacity to draw on knowledge of other collaborations and experiences. They have been valued for bringing a degree of objectivity along with this knowledge: they do not represent the interests of any individual organisation within the collaboration and thus can be an 'honest broker'. This has been particularly significant because of the way in which the Baring Foundation has funded AdviceUK, in conjunction with **nef** and the Directory of Social Change, to deliver aspects of the Nottingham programme, including training and the local implementation of the 'systems thinking' approach. Whilst having such external expertise available is not a prerequisite for a successful collaboration, its presence should provide encouragement for the chances of success.

- **A STRUCTURE FOR DECISION AND DELIVERY**

The examples display different organisational and governing models. In Avon and Nottingham there is a constituted Advice Network, but Advice Services Coventry remains unconstituted, although possibly about to become part of a wider organisational framework. Nonetheless, each collaboration has developed effective structures for sharing information, exploring and developing opportunities and making decisions. In Avon and Coventry this is supported by the employment of dedicated employees to work on behalf of the collaboration, whereas this is not the case in Nottingham. Thus, there is no 'one model' to present from these experiences. However, it is undoubtedly the case that an effective structure for collaboration is needed and that it is important that decisions can be made efficiently and implemented effectively. These arrangements are unlikely to be in place at the start of a collaboration of this kind, but it would be wise for funders to consider whether proposals for collaboration include effective plans in this regard.

- **EXTERNAL FACTORS**

As a footnote, it is worth mentioning two external factors that appear to have had an impact in the collaboration examples we have looked at: the policy and funding environments. They are not really facilitating factors, but may have been influential in the development of these collaborations.

The examples in this report are collaborations of organisations involved in delivering social welfare legal advice and at the time of their development the Legal Services Commission was promoting the CLAC/CLAN model: indeed it was a serious possibility that this model could have been introduced in at least two of the three areas. It was made clear in the interviews that the CLAC/CLAN model was not popular and was seen as something of a threat: to the quality and reach of services and also to organisational survival. Whether or not this was justified, the important question is what impact this had on those seeking to collaborate. Was this 'external threat' instrumental in concentrating minds and helping to focus those seeking to collaborate? It seems possible that it was: certainly it would appear that AdviceUK's work on 'systems thinking' from 2006 grew out of a direct attempt to develop a bottom-up alternative.

Finally, the collaborations were developed at a time of growth in funding opportunities. It has been commented on above the extent to which this assisted the process of collaboration – it is easier to agree how to divide a growing resource than a shrinking one. Although there were previously real choices to be made that impacted on individual organisations, there was not (in the main) the need to make decisions that excluded vital funding and possibly undermined the continuing existence of any organisation. That is not the current situation. In a time of significant cuts in public expenditure (and an associated

increase in demands for advice services) it is inevitable that some organisations will lose out to such an extent that they can no longer survive independently. Whilst one solution presented as a response to this situation is for more collaboration between VCS organisations, the paradoxical truth is that it is likely to be harder to make (non-merger) collaborations work in such an environment. We have seen how important it is to be able to build trust: this will be much more difficult when decisions taken within a collaboration could impact negatively on an organisation's capacity to survive.

Section 5: Final observations

The interviews and associated documentation suggest that considerable benefits have been realised from the three collaborations under review. It would appear that an effective relationship has been developed between the advice sector and the local authorities – as funder/commissioner, but even more importantly, as strategic authority. This relationship is built on a greater understanding and confidence in each other; relationships are perhaps more honest and open and there is a shared understanding of both community needs and the pressures and constraints on each of the organisations. Local authorities report a better understanding of community needs and how advice services contribute to wider social goals within their areas. Working together, strategies have been developed and implemented that address these needs in more holistic ways, as evidenced by the ‘systems thinking’ approach in Coventry and Nottingham. The working group in Nottingham that is seeking to draw out systemic lessons from Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit cases presenting at the Law Centre is a good example of this: similarly the review of homeless advice services in Coventry, shared between the local authority and ASC.

The collaborations have also helped strengthen the capacity of the advice sector in each area, with particular advantages for the smaller, community based organisations. Thus, sharing of policies and procedures, shared training and other staff support contribute to guaranteeing standards across the collaboration, in the process building the capacity of the smaller members. Facilitated by improved communications (both between agencies and with the public and service users), referral arrangements are reported to have improved significantly. Improved opportunities to access funding by working in partnership have been reported. Working together appears to have produced more effective, collaboration-based responses on the policy level, with a perceived greater capacity for the partners to influence policy by pooling their information, case studies and views.

Various challenges and risks have been highlighted in developing these collaborations. They have required a considerable investment of time by managers, trustees and staff over several years. Leadership, trust and confidence appear to have been important related issues and these have themselves required time to develop. There are governance issues to address, to ensure that collaboration does not act as a drag in decision making and responding to initiatives and opportunities. The three examples explored in this study each developed in a period of growth in the availability of funding and there will be particular challenges in achieving the same level of cooperation in a time of cuts.

Collaboration at this level comes at a price. Each collaboration has received funding over a number of years, not just from the Baring Foundation, but also from other independent and public sector funders. It has not been possible within the remit of this review to analyse exactly how this funding has been applied to the different elements of work involved, but benefits have been achieved in relation to service delivery, organisational development, policy and strategy. The important question is whether these are more or less expensively achieved through collaboration than by operating independently. Whilst this study was unable to provide an answer to this, those involved (from the local authority side, as much as the service delivery organisations) clearly consider the return on this investment to be worthwhile.

A key area requiring further evidence in order to draw firm conclusions is in relation to the impact of collaboration on outcomes. As the **nef** study in Coventry demonstrated, it is important to consider outcomes not only for the individual, but also for the community and in relation to policy and law. **nef** concluded that ASC members contribute to a range of strategic priorities within Coventry and that investing in quality advice provision delivers cost savings across council budgets, enables vulnerable individuals to uphold their rights and prevents social exclusion. That conclusion is consistent with the views reported in this study, but finding effective methods of demonstrating outcomes in an ongoing way (as opposed to within a research study) would appear to be an important area for further attention.

These findings – subject to the caveats expressed at the beginning of the previous section – can be compared to the key points highlighted from the environmental scan. To what extent does collaborating in the way described:

- help empower communities to be “in charge of their own destiny”?
- help voluntary and community organisations cope better in a time of major cuts in public expenditure?
- help commissioners understand the needs of service users and communities?
- enable a stronger community engagement in local strategies and partnerships?
- provide an alternative model of commissioning, based on principles of community engagement and empowerment?

In spite of the caveats, there is a strong case for believing that the collaborations provide a very positive contribution in each of these areas. As well as legal advice specialists, they involve local, community based organisations that know their own communities and are able to represent and respond to their needs. They involve and inform local commissioners and are closely engaged with local strategies and partnerships. They provide an alternative model of commissioning to the ‘top down’ approach of CLACs and CLANs.

It remains to be seen, however, whether such collaborations will be robust in a time of major cutbacks in funding and services. Given the positive history and trust developed over the years in these examples, there is a good case for believing that they will find a way of coping, indeed, of making the best of a bad situation. It seems a lot less likely, however, that similar collaborations can be built from scratch in such an environment.

What is very clear from these examples is that collaboration is a way of working – of designing and delivering services – that requires continuing investment and support, exactly as do organisations delivering services on their own. There is no ‘end state’ of facilitating a collaboration that can be achieved and moved on from. The question for funders is whether the investment to support working collaboratively provides returns that make that investment worthwhile. This study does not have sufficient evidence to enable this judgement to be made conclusively, but it provides a strong case for believing that collaborating in the ways described has distinct advantages for service users, for voluntary and community organisations and for local authorities in their strategic role and as commissioners. Thus, in terms of the ‘Big Society’, collaborations of this kind appear to have a lot to offer: bolstering the fabric of community infrastructure and providing the access to community support and engagement upon which the ‘Big Society’ is premised.

Endnote: The impact on independence

When the STVS 2008 programme was launched the Baring Foundation identified a number of factors that it considered to be damaging to the independence of the VCS:⁶⁵

- Increasing direction – increased pressure to adapt services to meet the requirements of commissioners, which may not reflect the needs of service users;
- Making it hard to maintain quality – the impact of ‘fixed fee factories’ and the emphasis on what is cheapest in the short term and easier to count;
- Transferring risk – advice organisations that deliver services but are not involved in their design, shouldering all the risks;
- Undermining challenge – pressure to self-censor for fear of funding withdrawal;
- Undermining a policy role – lack of capacity to feedback to government;
- Undermining a role in prevention and public legal education – finding it harder to provide these elements;
- Increasing competition – increasing tension and reducing the capacity to collaborate;
- Eroding distinctiveness – the capacity to work in different ways, to innovate and be flexible and responsive to local circumstances;

65) *Rights with Meaning: The background and aims of the 2008 STVS – independence programme focusing on advice and advocacy organisations*, Baring Foundation: page 14.

- Diminishing unrestricted funding – using reserves to subsidise legal aid contracts.

This study has not sought specifically to address these questions but the results provide very positive pointers in relation to:

- The collaborations reported have engaged effectively with commissioners and strategic authorities to ensure that the needs of service users are both understood and responded to;
- Quality has remained at the forefront of service delivery – for both those delivering and commissioning services;
- Risk has been more equitably shared;
- Open and honest communication has enabled a more challenging approach, without a fear of funding withdrawal;
- An enhanced and improved role in commenting on and contributing to social policy is evident;
- Removal of the fear of collaborating in the face of pressure to compete;
- The support of innovation and distinctiveness;
- Removal of pressure to use reserves to subsidise legal aid contracts.

Annex 1

Interviewees

The following people were interviewed as part of this study:

AVON

Hywel Caddy; Investment and Grants Manager, Bristol City Council.

Ben Sansum; Project Worker, Advice Network.

COVENTRY

Sue Bent; Director, Coventry Law Centre.

Charley Gibbons; Director, Coventry Citizens Advice Bureau.

Shokat Lal; Assistant Director (Customer Services), Customer and Workforce Services, Coventry City Council.

NOTTINGHAM

Clare Ashton; Chair, Clifton Advice Centre.

Lisa Black; Head of Revenues, Benefits and Welfare Rights, Nottingham City Council.

Cheryl Weston; Manager, Nottingham Law Centre.

ADVICEUK

Simon Johnson; BOLD Advice Project Coordinator.

Annex 2: Project summaries

Advice Centres for Avon

Description

Advice Centres for Avon (ACFA) is a regional umbrella body with 35 members who provide a range of community, general and specialist legal advice across Bristol, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset. It aims to support member agencies to provide free, independent and confidential advice services. It is represented on a variety of forums in the region, keeps members up to date with changes and events, promotes affordable local training and facilitates networking and sharing of learning and skills. Members of ACFA may be generalist agencies for which advice is a small part of their portfolio.

The Advice Network (AN) is a project of ACFA and was launched in July 2009. The purpose of the partnership is to improve access to advice and legal services by working collaboratively together and with funders to ensure the development of sustainable services that meet the needs of the most vulnerable communities, increasing early access to advice and providing a seamless quality of service. Members of AN have the provision of social welfare/legal advice as their core function.

Current members of AN:

- Age UK Bristol
- Avon & Bristol Law Centre
- Bangladesh Association
- Bristol Bangladeshi Women's Organisation
- Brigstowe Project
- Bristol Citizens' Advice Bureau
- Bristol Debt Advice Centre
- CHAS Bristol
- Nailsea Disability Initiative
- North Bristol Advice Centre
- North Somerset CAB
- Refugee Action
- St Paul's Advice Centre
- Shelter
- Shire Advice Services
- Somali Advice Project
- South Bristol Advice Services
- South Gloucestershire CAB
- South West Law
- Welfare Rights and Money Advice Services
- West of England Centre for Independent Living

Approved support

STVS 2008: £175,000 over three years to support Advice Centres for Avon to strengthen its influence and maintain the independence of its members through supported learning, business development and increasing capacity to engage with national debates.

Precursors

- Funded by CapacityBuilders, the BRIGHT Project was set up in April 2005 in response to inequality of access to services within black and minority communities in relation to advice on legal rights and responsibilities.
- Funding of £419,000 over three years from the BIG Lottery Fund Advice Plus programme to help establish the Advice Network to develop sustainable advice services that meet the needs of the most vulnerable communities. (Note that this was largely concurrent funding, commencing in September 2008, and operating in conjunction with the Baring Foundation funding, rather than prior funding.)

Objectives of funded programme

- Engage effectively with relevant local consultations, especially with regard to future commissioning.
- Develop skills in tendering and fundraising, budgeting and full cost recovery.
- Access a wider funding base in order to limit reliance on government funding.
- Build a strong evidence base for use in consultation responses, campaigning and future fundraising.
- Instigate a workforce development programme that will enable the sustainability of local, qualified advisors.
- Share learning from the project nationally.

Activities

- Collation of ACFA's evidence of need and best practice into accessible formats.
- Collation and development of responses to consultations.
- Research and dissemination of information on policy changes affecting ACFA members.
- Training, mentoring and other activities to increase capabilities in fundraising, tendering and all aspects of advice related work.
- A feasibility study on workforce development.
- Develop a new website.

Key achievements

- Establishing the Advice Network as a valued and trusted partner with the Bristol City Council (BCC) and others such as the Joint Planning Board and South Gloucestershire Welfare Advice Partnership. This has led to success in influencing BCC's commissioning plans.
- Benchmarking of member agencies, assessing many aspects of their work, including: current systems and policies; training provision and needs; quality control; staffing and the use of volunteers, etc.
- Coordinated responses to a large number of consultations, including the Social Care Green Paper (national consultation), Voluntary & Charity Sector Infrastructure Support (local authority consultation), Modernising Customer Services (local authority consultation) and NAO audit of Housing & Council Tax Benefit processing. Another consultation response on the effects of the recession was used as part of the local authority's needs analysis and eight agencies were assisted in collating information on the impact of the recession for the local authority. Support has also been provided to members in responding to that needs analysis and commissioning plans.
- Launch of a new website, facilitating more effective sharing of information.
- Developing a library of research regarding client needs, the benefits of advice and different models of delivery and making this available to members via the website.
- Implementing a new common monitoring system across the Network that will for the first time allow ACFA to state how many individuals, cases and one-off piece of advice member provide.
- Provision of regular information to members via a newsletter and guidance regarding statistical best practice in needs analyses and satisfaction surveys.
- Providing peer support to smaller member agencies, including help in fundraising and earmarked funding allowances to enable them to free up their staff to participate in activities of the partnership, including attending meetings and training.
- Providing/sourcing a range of training for member agencies.
- Supporting two consortia of agencies who successfully bid for LSC contracts covering the whole area.
- Securing LA funding for the main advice providers for three years without a cut.

Advice Services Coventry (ASC)

Description

ASC is a partnership of (currently) 12 independent social welfare advice centres in Coventry who are working together to develop a coordinated approach to the delivery of advice services. The outcome sought is easily accessible, well publicised advice and information services that meet the needs of the citizens of Coventry. ASC began operating in 2005: it is an informal network, without a formal constitution or governing body.

Current members are:

- Age UK Coventry
- Coventry & Warwickshire Family Mediation
- Coventry Benefits Advice Line
- Coventry Citizens Advice Bureau
- Coventry Cyrenians
- Coventry Law Centre
- Coventry Refugee Centre
- Coventry University Students' Union Advice Centre
- Foleshill 396
- Holbrooks Community Care Association
- Willenhall Advice Centre
- Wood End Advice & Information Centre

Approved support

- STVS 2008: £191,000 approved for a two year programme of activities to strengthen individual partners of Advice Services Coventry and strengthen the partnership as a whole.
- STVS 2010: £150,000 approved to develop, implement and evaluate a mixed economy model for community-based advice delivery in Coventry – to strengthen agencies involved and to influence commissioners of advice services.

Precursors

- The partnership began in 2005 with Neighbourhood Renewal funding, which was used to undertake a mapping exercise and develop neighbourhood based advice services.
- In 2008 obtained BIG Lottery funding under their Advice Plus programme. This funded a series of activities to improve coordination between advice agencies and to support community groups, establish a referral process and website and employ a Coordinator.

Objectives of funded programme

- An in-depth review of the processes, systems and type of work undertaken by each partner agency to achieve best value, using the 'systems thinking' approach.
- Investment in improved IT systems.
- Development of common outcome measures for advice services.
- Improve governance of partner agencies by undertaking a governance health check in each.
- Improve capacity to undertake social policy work and campaigning through improved data recording.
- Improve links with community groups and potential to act as their advocates by establishing a forum of community members.

Activities

- Continuation funding towards employment of Coordinator to help oversee and drive the programme and a Social Policy Coordinator.
- Improved IT software, systems, training and coordination.

- Support and training for community advocates
- Systems review, using a 'systems thinking' approach.
- Governance review.
- Needs mapping and analysis.
- Participation in review of outcomes in advice and social return on investment.
- Review of finances and costings of ASC and its members.

Key achievements

- An effective mapping of need in the Coventry area and what matters to clients, enhanced by a 'systems thinking' analysis that has identified areas of waste in the system. As a result of this, agreeing a set of key operating principles that all members have signed up to. The ability to evidence the need for advice services has contributed to the local authority not cutting funding.
- Improved IT through the purchase and installation of appropriate software for Coventry Law Centre, plus improved capacity with existing software for four other agencies, as a result of technical assistance and training. All partners now have IT systems that meet their needs and support the improvement in processes. The enhanced systems have allowed for continuous data collection across the partnership, which has improved the accuracy of our joint data.
- A social policy steering group comprising front line advisors from ASC member agencies has been established. The ASC website has been amended to add a campaigning section to allow anyone in any ASC agency to raise an issue that they think may be suitable for some social policy work. Successes include: negotiating a change in the way one bank responds to proposals from advisors on behalf of clients in debt; regular liaison meetings with Job Centre Plus. Coventry Citizens Advice Bureau employed a social policy coordinator to co-ordinate social policy work across ASC.
- The social policy resource has facilitated building a stronger relationship with DWP locally, with regular policy meetings and also greater engagement with the Coventry Partnership (LSP).
- Using the 'systems thinking' methodology to map some public services from the perspective of the customer, highlighting where services do not work effectively. Within services for homeless people, this has led to a joint review of services involving all service providers working with the Council. ASC will jointly lead this work with the Council.
- Completing a financial health check on Advice Services Coventry and each of its members in order to move Advice Services Coventry closer to a position of knowing how to price its services in a contracting situation, and to strengthen each partner's understanding of this within their own organisations. This included a detailed investigation into the way advice is funded in each of the member organisations, along with volumes of work being undertaken, the time taken to do this work and an analysis of costs.
- Examining the outcomes of advice and the contribution it makes to the local community (in collaboration with AdviceUK and **nef**). This has enabled ASC to evidence the impact of what it does locally and how it contributes to local authority targets.

Advice Nottingham (AN)

Description

Advice Nottingham is a consortium of seven advice agencies who have been working together strategically since June 2007 to ensure that clients have access to consistent, high-quality and timely advice services, and to coordinate Nottingham's advice services to respond to current and emerging need.

Current members are:

- Bestwood Advice Centre
- Clifton Advice Centre
- Meadows Advice Group
- Nottingham & District Citizens Advice Bureau
- Nottingham Law Centre
- Notts Housing Advice
- St Ann's Advice Group

Approved support

- STVS 2008: £30,000 approved for a 'systems thinking' in advice pilot. This fed into the support provided to AdviceUK (AUK) under the BOLD programme. The majority of funding was directed through AUK, with some to each of the participating members in Nottingham to cover the costs of the work and to contribute to the cost of involvement by individual Advice Nottingham members.
- STVS 2010: £86,000 to complete the redesign of independent advice services, based on evidence of client demand and to influence service commissioning and reduce unnecessary demand for advice from public service failures.

Precursors

- The (then) nine members of AN obtained Lloyds TSB Foundation funding to work together to examine existing advice services, identify problems and produce a vision and new strategic approach. Published "A new vision for welfare advice in Nottingham" in March 2007.
- Funding from the BIG Lottery Fund (2007-09) to develop a common structure to enable the nine advice organisations to provide an integrated advice service in the city.

Objectives of funded programme

- Analyse the delivery of advice services in the city using a 'systems thinking' approach, as originally developed under AUK's RADICAL programme.
- Commissioning services, including incorporating the findings of the analysis.

Activities

- Analysis of the structures and arrangements for advice provision, using a 'systems thinking' approach.
- Training and support on contracting and commissioning.
- Support for collaboration between advice agencies and helping strengthen the relationship with the local authority.

Key achievements

- Developed a strong relationship with and secured the commitment of the City Council to participate in developing the approach to commissioning. This ensured that the contribution of all agencies – including the smaller, community based – was recognised and included in the strategic approach.
- Adoption of a Partnership Agreement with Nottingham City Council in July 2010.
- Improved the capacity of Advice Nottingham (AN) members – in relation to their internal systems, collaboration and working with the local authority.

AdviceUK

Description

With 899 members at 31st March 2010, AdviceUK is the UK's largest support network for free, independent advice centres. It was formed in 1979 as the Federation of Independent Advice Centres (FIAC). It is an independent charity, with a richly diverse membership. AdviceUK's role is to provide support, training and other services to help members improve their effectiveness, and to influence government and other bodies with an interest in social welfare law advice. It is a key member of the Advice Services Alliance.

Approved support

- STVS 2008: £200,000 over two years approved for BOLD: a partnership involving AdviceUK, New Economics Foundation (nef) and Directory of Social Change (DSC) to develop the RADICAL user-centred advice service approach, improve tendering skills in advice agencies and improve relationships with central government.
- STVS 2010: £135,000 to secure evidence of the effectiveness and economic value of the BOLD intervention, develop a sustainable method for its extension and secure support from central and local government.

Precursors

- BIG Lottery funded project: Working Together For Advice (WTFA) project.⁶⁶
- Baring Foundation funded project: RADICAL [which produced *'It's the system, stupid'*] (see below).

Objectives of funded programme

- Initial focus on Manchester and Coventry: subsequent involvement of Nottingham and somewhat revised and reduced focus on Manchester, in response to the decision by the Manchester City Council to proceed with a Community Legal Advice Service with the LSC.
- Draw on learning from the RADICAL project to develop an exemplar approach to advice service funding and commissioning, based on a 'systems thinking' approach.
- Develop a programme of training and resources for local advice organisations, focussing on influencing the implementation of commissioning.
- Develop resources and provide support to improve engagement with Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) and ensure the contribution of advice to local priorities, eg in Sustainable Community Strategies or Local Area Agreements (LAAs) is recognised.
- Capture the value of smaller, independent organisations involved in advice provision.
- Focus of work in Coventry: to develop an outcomes framework and support for local advice agency contributions in developing the Sustainable Communities Strategy. Using a 'systems thinking' approach to analyse and redesign service provision.
- In Nottingham: to assist in strengthening the relationship between advice organisations and the local authority.
- In Manchester (revised): provide support to local providers in commissioning process with MCC and LSC.

⁶⁶) WTFA completed at the end of September 2010. It was a 30-month long consortium project designed to provide targeted and coordinated resources and support to frontline advice organisations, to help the advice sector achieve a sustainable future.

Activities

- Relationship development within the target cities, with key stakeholders.
- Training for advice agencies on contracting and commissioning.
- Support to assist advice agencies in the commissioning process.
- Support for collaboration between advice agencies in each area, e.g. in developing a strategy for advice in Manchester, an outcomes framework in Coventry and helping strengthen the relationship with the local authority in Nottingham.
- Support in Coventry to implement a 'systems thinking' analysis.

Key achievements

- In Manchester: supported community-based advice organisations to engage with and respond to commissioning, and supported the development of a vision and strategy for advice.
- In Coventry: supported advice agencies to demonstrate the value of their contribution to Coventry's priorities. The report *Outcomes in Advice* also used a Social Return On Investment approach to value the advice given and to cost the public service failures that cause people to seek advice.
- In Nottingham: Developed a strong relationship with and secured the commitment of the City Council to participate in developing a commissioning framework. Improved the capacity of Advice Nottingham (AN) members to negotiate with the local authority, resulting in the drafting of a Partnership Agreement.
- Developed an LAA toolkit that maps the way in which advice contributes to the achievement of National Indicators.
- Raised awareness and disseminated the learning from the project at a variety of local, regional and national events and meetings.

Working together for advice

This was funded by the BIG Lottery Fund under the first phase of its 'Advice Plus' programme. Starting in January 2008, a total grant of £5.7m over three years was approved for a consortium of six advice agencies, under the Advice Services Alliance. The programme has eight work streams:

- Enhancing frontline advice.
- Developing a quality mark.
- Enhancing frontline advice.
- Advice outcomes.
- Developing discrimination advice.
- Workforce development and training.
- Promoting advice.

RADICAL project

This project was supported by the Baring Foundation and took an alternative approach to the design, coordination and integration of advice services. It initially involved a study in the contrasting localities of Powys County and Oxford City during 2007-2008 in conjunction with Vanguard Consulting. This work led to the publication of the report *'It's the System Stupid! Radically Rethinking Advice'* in October 2008.⁶⁷

67) See: <http://www.adviceuk.org.uk/projects-and-resources/projects/radical/ITSS>

Strengthening the Voluntary Sector

STVS working paper series

Matthew Smerdon (2006) *Allies not servants: Voluntary sector relations with government: a discussion of the thinking behind the new focus of the Baring Foundation's Strengthening the Voluntary Sector grants programme*. STVS working paper no.1. London: Baring Foundation.

Cathy Pharoah (2007) *Sources of Strength: An analysis of applications to the Baring Foundation's Strengthening the Voluntary Sector – independence grants programme*. STVS working paper No. 2. London: Baring Foundation.

Matthew Smerdon (ed.) (2009) *The First Principle of Voluntary Action: Essays on the independence of the voluntary sector from government in Canada, England, Germany, Northern Ireland, Scotland, United States of America and Wales*. STVS working paper no.3. London: Baring Foundation

Matthew Smerdon (2009) *Rights with Meaning: The background and aims of the 2008 STVS – independence programme focusing on advice and advocacy organisations*. STVS Working Paper No.4. London: Baring Foundation.

Matthew Smerdon (2009) *Mission, Money, Mandate: report of the Independence Summit held at the Baring Foundation*. STVS Working Paper No.5. London: Baring Foundation.

A selection of publications arising out of work supported by the STVS – independence programme

Action for Advocacy (2008) *Quality Performance Mark*. London: Action for Advocacy

AdviceUK (2008) *It's the System Stupid: Radically Re-thinking Advice*. London: AdviceUK

Alan Lawrie and Jan Mellor (2008) *Surviving Contracts: The complete guide for voluntary organisations*. London: Directory of Social Change.

Baring Foundation and NCVO (2008) *Standing Apart, Working Together: A new self assessment tool for the independence of voluntary organisations*. NCVO: London.

Bassac (2008) *Change Check: A practical guide to assessing the impact of your community centre*. London: bassac.

Clinks (2008) *Race for Justice – campaign materials*. York: Clinks.

Sharon Wright (2008) *Contracting out employment services: Lessons from Australia, Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands*. London: Child Poverty Action Group.

Suzanne Murray (2008) *A guide to children's centre management for voluntary and community organisations*. London: Islington Play Association.

ISBN 978-1-906172-13-8