



performance hub

**Successful strategies:
Real learning from real experiences**

July 2007

A Performance Hub Report
Cathy Sharp, Mark Bitel and Jocelyn Jones
Partners in Evaluation

The Performance Hub works to help third sector organisations (TSOs)* achieve more.

(*charities, voluntary organisations, community groups and social enterprises)

Our vision is of high performing TSOs having a positive impact upon the lives of millions.

Our overall aim is for improved third sector performance, and performance to be an integral part of the third sector's agenda.

Four specific aims contribute to this overall aim:

- To increase TSOs' awareness of the benefits of focusing on performance and improve their ability to use performance tools and approaches.
- To increase and improve the performance support offered to frontline organisations by local, sub-regional, regional and national infrastructure of all types
- To develop a more relevant, more effective and more accessible knowledge base about third sector performance.
- To strengthen the two way relationship between funders and TSOs on performance issues.

For more information, see our website at www.performancehub.org.uk

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Performance Hub
4 Coldbath Square
London
EC1R 5HL

Partners in Evaluation
123 Westminster Bridge Road
London
SE1 7HR

infoline@performancehub.org.uk
www.performancehub.org.uk

enquiries@evaluation.u-net.com

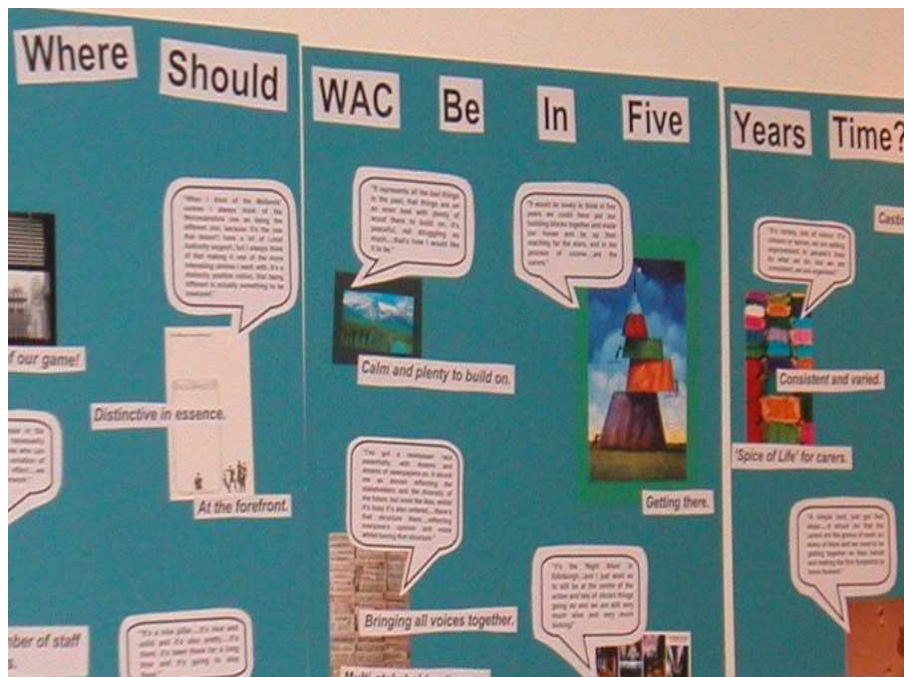
Infoline: 0800 652 5787

Successful strategies: Real learning from real experiences

Findings from the Performance Hub action research case studies on strategic planning

Contents

Preface.....	4
Executive Summary	6
Introduction	6
Headline findings	6
Top ten learning points.....	6
1.0 Introduction and background to the project.....	10
1.1 Background to the action research project.....	10
1.2 What makes a strategy?	10
2.0 Our approach to working with the case studies	12
2.1 Selection of case studies	12
2.2 Working with and across case studies	12
2.3 Summary outline of each case study organisation	13
3.0 Key messages and findings from the case studies	17
3.1 Ensure there is a clear and up to date vision and mission.....	17
3.3 Connect strategy to the values of the organisation	18
3.4 Ensure a focus on outcomes	19
3.5 Be appreciative	21
3.6 Acknowledge and celebrate what the organisation does well.....	22
3.7 Plan and manage the process	23
3.8 Ensure collaboration in the process of strategy development	24
3.9 Be clear about your stakeholders	24
3.10 Encourage active user involvement in strategy development.....	25
3.11 Step off the beaten track: try out new methods to promote conversations.....	26
3.12 Visit another organisation to gain inspiration.....	28
3.13 Consider new and unmet needs.....	29
3.14 Acknowledge tensions and address diversity	30
3.15 See the big picture first, then share out the tasks.....	31
3.16 Use existing information to inform thinking and planning	31
3.17 Establish a monitoring and evaluation framework for the strategy.....	32
3.18 Find a critical friend	32
3.19 Final reflections	33
Annex: Detailed case studies	35
Case study 1: The challenge of breaking from being reactive to being proactive, African Community Involvement Association	35
Case Study 2: Widening ownership of the strategy process, Advocacy West Lancs, Ormskirk	39
Case study 3: Making environmental sustainability financially sustainable, Dorset Agenda 21	43
Case study 4: Beyond the day to day: looking at the 'bigger picture' together, Mayfield Community Association, Bradford	48
Case Study 5: The need for a clear evidence base for strategic planning, Worcestershire Association of Carers, Worcester.....	52
Bibliography	57



Preface

This report is primarily aimed at those looking for practical advice and guidance on developing strategy. This includes those just starting out with strategy and those that have done it before, but want to find ways of engaging the rest of the organisation and keeping their strategy fresh and relevant.

It is likely to be of interest to:

- frontline third sector organisations looking for practical advice and help on how to go about forming strategies.
- advisers and development workers in infrastructure organisations such as councils for voluntary service, rural community councils, black and minority ethnic support organisations and others working in an advisory role to the sector such as funding advisers in local authorities.

Academics, policymakers and funders may also find this report of interest.

The report is based on an action research project that worked with five small and medium third sector organisations to develop their strategies. It introduces and explains the key messages of strategy and the findings of the project. It also demonstrates that strategy is about long-term and outcomes-focused thinking, planning and activity. The report should help organisations understand how to take steps towards reviewing, developing or forming strategies by explaining practical approaches that have worked in the case study organisations. Hopefully it will also inspire organisations to change their practice and engage with strategic planning, choices and decisions.

This project was completed in a short period of time, much of it over the summer of 2006. Despite this timetable, the goodwill and commitment of everyone involved has contributed to the positive atmosphere of the project and to an environment in which we have been able to share and learn from each other.

The consultancy team

This action research project was undertaken by a consortium of consultants led by Partners in Evaluation, in order to have a wider geographic coverage of this England-wide project, and for the consultants to have greater proximity to the organisations with which they worked. The team comprised:

Mark Bitel and Tony Gross, Partners in Evaluation
Dr. Cathy Sharp, Research for Real
Jocelyn Jones, Mindful Practice

Executive Summary

Introduction

Many third sector organisations (TSOs) are trapped in a cycle of reaction, fire-fighting and problem-solving. Time spent on the strategic tasks of reflecting, reviewing, visioning, relationship building, planning, developing focus and anticipating challenges can reduce the amount of time spent managing crises and avoiding stress and burn-out.

Valuing and making time for strategy is central to organisational success. Busy third sector managers need accessible, relevant information about how to create a successful strategy.

The Performance Hub commissioned Partners in Evaluation to investigate how TSOs create successful strategy. The consultants worked with five small and medium-sized TSOs in England between June and November 2006 to help them develop their strategy – and to generate learning along the way.

Headline findings

Strategic planning can provide an impetus to consider the 'bigger picture' and to think laterally, outside the day-to-day tasks of running an organisation, project, campaign or building. A strong organisation needs both clear strategic leadership *and* dialogue about strategic direction. Dialogue is essential to buy-in, involvement and the delivery of the strategy.

Strategic planning works best when it is **appreciative, reflective, participatory and outcomes-focused**. It should **value the knowledge and expertise of all stakeholders**. It should bring stakeholders together to enable **dialogue** about values and purpose across the wider organisation and to acknowledge and value the complexity and connections across each TSO's environment. All of this takes time and, critically, commitment from trustees and senior managers. It also requires a culture open to listening and learning. Closed, linear strategic planning processes without opportunities to share and investigate ideas produce weaker strategies.

Top ten learning points

The rest of this summary report introduces the top ten learning points that emerged from the project.

1. Up-to-date vision and mission

The environment that TSOs operate in changes rapidly. This means that it is vital that TSOs have a clear and up-to-date vision and mission. They may need to be reviewed every few years or so, when major changes are expected in the wider environment or when the organisation is planning for the future and thinking strategically. The vision and mission statements should be actively used to test to what degree any new developments, services or projects contribute to the vision and the mission, so that the efforts the organisation makes contribute to the intended purposes.

2. Focus and specificity

Much of the process of developing strategy involves turning general ideas into specific and precise plans. The process of defining exactly what changes (or outcomes) the organisation wants to achieve and what it wants to do, provides focus and helps it to consider other related possibilities. This is essential in order to test and challenge assumptions, clarify expectations, plan effectively, prioritise actions, budget accurately and ultimately, to evaluate the degree to which the organisation has been successful. The opposite of focus and specificity is fudge and woolliness, which limits organisational success. TSOs also need to establish an appropriate monitoring and evaluation framework as part of the task of developing a new strategic plan. This will help them stay on track, capture organisational learning and sew monitoring into everything they do.

3. Connect strategy to values to ensure ownership and buy-in

Too often, strategies remain paper-based statements of good intentions. Yet the strategic planning process is crucial to ensuring the wider ownership and eventual adoption of the strategy amongst key stakeholders. The process itself is a chance to generate energy and involvement amongst staff, service users, trustees or board members and other stakeholders. It is important to ensure that the strategy process connects with the driving values of the organisation. Connecting the strategic planning process to your organisational values will remind everyone involved of what they have in common. Providing an opportunity to say something about what motivates or inspires people in relation to the work of the organisation can help focus and kick-start the formation of a strategy.

4. Using appreciation to inspire

Appreciative approaches¹ can help develop better visions and missions. They are a good way to reconnect individuals to the larger purpose. They stretch vision about what might be possible in the future and allow disagreements to be discussed in a more positive environment. They help to identify strengths and to recognise how far an organisation has come to get to the current position; celebrating this 'distance travelled' can be energising and motivating.

5. Collaborative consultation

The process of developing strategy should be collaborative, rather than the responsibility of a single individual or small group. The mix of perspectives and the chance to test out ideas amongst different stakeholders, including service users and staff, is a vital part of the process. Insights from stakeholders may surprise or challenge the organisation.

Making sure all the right stakeholders have their say and recognising that there might be conflicts of interest between different stakeholders is critical: consideration of where power lies and how to balance any conflicting interests is also important, but on the other hand, mixing all your stakeholders up at the same event can be rewarding!

Many TSOs are not necessarily good at communicating what they do; the consultation process in itself can be an opportunity to do this and to find out what else is going on, promote ownership of the findings and improve relationships with key stakeholders. It is an opportunity to make new contacts.

¹ An appreciative approach begins with what the organisation does well and considers how to build from that, rather than starting with an assumption of a problem that needs to be fixed.

6. Creative and inclusive techniques

There are lots of creative and engaging techniques that can help to encourage wider participation in the process. Questionnaires and surveys may have a role, but rarely promote energetic conversations about vision and purpose. Simple visual methods and 'open space'² sessions work well to prompt conversations.

Meeting up with other organisations and going on visits or away days are also valuable.

It is important to allow divergent views, needs and tensions to be heard, acknowledged, and considered. This requires building trust and confidence so that people feel genuinely able to say what they think in a constructive way. It is important to pay attention to the barriers that may hinder some people from giving their views; make sure there is a range of opportunities for people to express their opinions. Using pictures or visual methods is often a good way to allow people to talk about both more inspiring visions for the future and the more tricky, difficult issues that inevitably arise.

7. Evidence-led approaches

It is important to consider new and unmet needs and to base any planned developments on both evidence of need and a realistic assessment of organisational strengths and capabilities. Organisations should ensure that they use the existing information that they have about their activities and the outcomes they create to inform the thinking and planning process, and look to other existing sources of information, before embarking on any major new data gathering exercises.

8. Make time for the process

Developing strategy is a challenging process and finding time and space to think can be difficult. TSOs have to be prepared to engage in a process of assessment of their strengths and weaknesses in an open, honest and positive manner. They should expect to be challenged and to have their thinking subjected to scrutiny, but it takes time to build relationships of trust and respect that allow for a more robust exchange of views.

9. Clear planning

It is helpful to establish a clear plan and timetable for the strategy process. This helps to make the most of existing activities and events to draw more stakeholders into the processes. It is also helpful to establish an overview of the strategic direction first and perhaps divide up tasks amongst smaller working groups to work on the detail of implementation; although cross-group communication is essential to avoid multiple plans being developed in isolation. If possible, a small budget should be identified for the process; in fact, applying for funding to help an organisation make a step-change is quite legitimate.

10. The value of outside help

² 'Open space' offers an alternative to more traditional ways of running meetings: individual participants offer to host conversations in small groups. These happen simultaneously over the period of time available. Participants choose which conversations they want to be part of and are able to move around to join other conversations as and when they want to. For more information, visit www.openspaceworld.org

External facilitation of the planning process can break down barriers and create more open thinking. The input of even a few days' time can be valuable if used in a way that works with the existing strengths and capacities of the organisation. TSOs could benefit from access to such facilitators or 'critical friends'. One option could be for TSOs to seek out individuals in other TSOs, perhaps from other domains, with which they could form a reciprocal arrangement.

1.0 Introduction and background to the project

1.1 Background to the action research project

The Performance Hub provided funding for research and development work on strategic planning with five small and medium-sized third sector organisations (TSOs). External consultants worked with the selected case studies to assist them in developing their strategy and also to assess and report on the learning that resulted from the project. This report summarises the process and learning from the project.

The project was designed to build on existing understanding of strategic planning, guidance and resources. This included a Performance Hub expert workshop held in November 2005, which identified the key issues surrounding strategy development amongst TSOs.

This workshop identified that for small organisations and those new to the strategic planning process, strategic planning is often reactive to external demands and may often be undertaken simply to satisfy funders or a board, and is therefore not truly strategic. Strategies are often related more to the existing particular mission of an organisation, rather than being based on current evidence of need. The analysis that does take place is not always of a high quality.

1.2 What makes a strategy?

Often there is not a written plan as such; ideas about strategic direction may be in the heads of the staff or trustees and may not be well understood or more widely shared amongst other stakeholders. Some organisations manage the process by assigning responsibility to a single person, small group or external consultant; there is then little wider ownership of the plan, so that even if a plan is produced it may not be implemented and disillusion may result. Whilst there are some infrastructure organisations and networks that can provide support for organisations to develop strategy, using external help may result in the strategy being 'done to' the organisation; again ownership and implementation are likely to suffer.

It is recognised that there may be lots of good thinking and planning work that goes on within organisations that is not called strategy development or planning. Building on this understanding of the issues and other good practice guidance, the challenges of this project and for all strategy development are to:

- enable TSOs to articulate their organisational values in action; going beyond rhetoric and aligning services to values.
- use varied and appropriate tools and approaches to build trust amongst those developing strategy, to allow for an open and honest approach.
- focus on what is *really* going on and what exists already, in creative ways that energise participants and increase understanding of the wider issues.
- create maximum opportunities for participation and dialogue in small and large group processes within an organisation and with stakeholders.
- build ownership of the emerging strategy, intertwine strategy formulation with implementation and 'roll out' the strategy by beginning to embed it into the work of the organisation.
- promote high quality analysis and build validation into data analysis and interpretation as it proceeds to enhance ownership of the findings.

- build skills and capacity amongst participants and build organisational capacity to involve their users.
- develop skills and specific methods to measure the implementation of strategy in meaningful ways.
- evaluate the strategy development process as it proceeds, and build feedback into the process.

In summary, attention to the strategy development process is crucial to the development of an effective strategy. Whilst there is no single correct process to follow, it should encompass clarifying vision and mission, a review of the external environment, engagement with stakeholders, appraising options for the future, and tracking the progress of the strategy through monitoring and evaluation.

2.0 Our approach to working with the case studies

2.1 Selection of case studies

Small and medium-sized third sector organisations were invited to apply to become 'case studies'. The project was publicised to TSOs on the Performance Hub website and sent by the Hub to contacts on their own database. Partner agencies, umbrella organisations and voluntary sector networks, such as bassac, ACRE, CVS networks and Age Concern, also sent out invitations.

A total of 174 applications were received by the deadline; approximately 30 further applications were received after this time, indicating the substantial interest in the project.

Applications were initially assessed and shortlisted down to five per region by the consultancy team. The Performance Hub team in consultation with the consultants made final decisions about selection of case studies. There was a particular concern to ensure that TSOs that serve black and minority ethnic communities and rural areas were included in the final selection since it is known that such organisations face particular challenges in developing strategy. It was also important that the organisations chosen were at a stage when they would be able to make good use of the resources offered by the project and were able to commit to the process of developing a strategic plan by October 2006.

The final case studies chosen were:

- Advocacy West Lancs (AWL), Ormskirk
- African Community Involvement Association (ACIA), South London
- Dorset Agenda 21 (DA21), Dorset
- Mayfield Community Association (MCA), Bradford
- Worcester Association of Carers (WAC), Worcester.

The selected case studies each received four days of free consultancy support and development specifically tailored to the needs of their organisation. Each organisation also received a small grant of £1,600 in recognition of the costs involved in being a case study for this project.

A brief description of each case study is provided in section 2.3. Each case study is outlined in more detail in the Annex to this report.

2.2 Working with and across case studies

All the selected case studies were invited to a cross-case study inception event in Birmingham in June 2006. The purpose of this event was to:

- inspire and energise participating projects for the tasks ahead
- begin to build relationships between projects and consultants
- clarify expectations of all the partners
- enable the projects to feel part of a wider Performance Hub initiative.

An outline of how we planned to work together and different roles and responsibilities was discussed. Each case study was asked to provide a short

presentation about their organisation, using the 'project tree' approach³. This is described in more detail in section 3.5.

The remainder of the event discussed anticipated challenges and solutions and the next steps for each project. One of the issues identified was the relatively short time for the project; it was agreed that a realistic goal would be to work together to generate some positive thinking about strategy and a sense of travelling in the right direction, rather than expecting to have completed the entire strategy development process in a few months.

Other issues about stakeholder engagement were also discussed which provide useful lessons for other TSOs. These are included in section 3.

During the period June-November 2006, each of the case studies worked with an individual consultant to progress their strategy development process.

All the case study organisations came together again in October 2006 to share progress and learning. The event also included delegates who had not been part of the action research project, but who had an interest in developing strategy amongst small and medium-sized TSOs. The event served to test out and validate the emerging lessons from the action research process and these lessons are detailed in section 3.

The October event was organised around three themed workshops, which reflected some of the key lessons. These were:

- The value of widening the net of stakeholder involvement
- Creativity, appreciation and participation
- The value of clarity and gaining perspective.

The workshops were run as participative, conversational sessions involving the participants from the case studies and also drawing on the experience of others attending the event. The event also included a 'skills swap shop' that allowed anyone present to make an unprepared short presentation of a useful tool or idea that they had come across. This proved to be a lively session that drew more people into the process.

2.3 Summary outline of each case study organisation

African Community Involvement Association (ACIA)

ACIA was founded in 1994 to respond to the needs of African people living in London affected by HIV and AIDS. ACIA have four staff and a team of volunteers who deliver information and advice about a range of issues for people from African communities living with HIV, facilitate peer support groups and provided other practical assistance. As the needs of the communities have changed, ACIA has introduced new services such as programmes to help people return to the labour market and tackle discrimination at work. It has also broadened the scope of its work to other issues affecting the communities, such as substance misuse and in 2006, launched a free, high quality glossy treatment support magazine, *African Eye*, the first of its kind for African communities living in the UK.

³ For further information on this approach see Kennedy, A (1995) 'Measuring Health for All: A Feasibility Study in a Glasgow Community' in Bruce, N. et al (eds) *Research and Change in Urban Community Health*, Avebury. A similar approach is also referred to in the Learning, Evaluation and Planning (LEAP) framework Scottish Community Development Centre: see www.scdc.org.uk

In a climate of rapid change, ACIA has managed to survive where other African community-based TSOs have lost their funding. With funds from Charities Aid Foundation, in 2004 ACIA had bought in a consultant to develop a strategic business plan for 2005-10. However, they had made little progress towards realising the plan, particularly in the area of developing a social enterprise to generate new sources of funding. Now further changes to the HIV-sector represent a threat to ACIA's survival unless it can continue to adapt to the changing environment it operates in.

ACIA applied to become a case study as they wanted to build the sustainability of the organisation in the present, more difficult climate in which has HIV slipped down the spending priorities of public sector health and social care funders and there is an increasing lack of sympathy towards asylum seekers, refugees and migrants.

Advocacy West Lancs (AWL)

AWL is a small third sector organisation based in Ormskirk, Lancashire that was established in 1994. It provides volunteer advocates to assist with representation and support for any member of the community who may be vulnerable and who has difficulty communicating with health, social or other statutory services. It is a registered charity, which presently employs six staff and works with 10 volunteers. Advocacy is provided free of charge. The local primary care trust, social services, the Big Lottery, Comic Relief and several other funders who offer smaller pots of money fund the organisation.

The advocacy process seeks to work with people, not do things for people, working alongside them in a partnership approach. AWL provides advocacy for groups or individuals who may be vulnerable due to age, physical or mental illness, disability or frailty. Advocacy can enhance quality of life, help people to develop self-advocacy skills and give them more control and involvement in their lives.

Over the last few years, AWL had held strategy days with staff and done a SWOT and PEST analysis on the organisation, led by the Managing Director. This led to the development of a business plan in April 2004. Although this was not based on the involvement of all stakeholders or the board of trustees, it did help to put much of the necessary infrastructure in place for a growing organisation.

Since summer 2005, AWL has had a new 13 member board of trustees, recruited through external advertising. These developments made the time right for the organisation to address longer-term strategic planning through the Hub project to enable continued growth and stability of the charity.

Dorset Agenda 21 (DA21)

DA21 was founded in 1995 as a community-based forum for advising Dorset County Council on sustainability issues. Local Agenda 21 initiatives were set up by most local authorities in England to take forward the action from the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992 (also known as the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development). Agenda 21 is a comprehensive plan of action to be taken globally, nationally and locally in every area in which humans impact on the environment.

Based in Dorchester, DA21 has outlasted many other local Agenda 21 initiatives in other areas and has nearly 100 members. It became incorporated as a charity in 2003/4. DA21 works to raise awareness of sustainability issues (social, economic and environmental sustainability – energy, food, homes, transport), and has built a solid reputation for its networking, signposting and partnership working with other organisations in the sector.

In the last financial year, it had an annual income of approximately £25,000. Two staff have been employed to work on specific projects. However, the organisation has not attracted resources to allow it to employ sufficient paid staff to realise its aspirations and has relied heavily on the extensive commitment of the trustees, other volunteers and an unpaid coordinator.

This fragile organisational position coexisted with the relatively recent emergence of green or environmental issues on the mainstream political agenda; it seemed to be an opportune moment for DA21 to make a step change. Combined with the potential for wider lessons for similar volunteer and membership-based organisations, this made DA21 a strong case study project.

Mayfield Community Association (MCA)

MCA was established in January 2006 to support the development and use of the Mayfield Community Centre, in the Marshfield neighbourhood of Bradford. The Centre is a former old people's home in the Marshfield neighbourhood that was extended and developed for community use as part of the New Deal for Communities programme (NDC) by Bradford Trident.

The neighbourhood of Marshfield is located to the south of the city centre of Bradford. It has higher levels of youth unemployment and long-term unemployment rates than in the city as a whole. It also has a significant proportion of young people and those from black and minority ethnic communities.

The MCA membership comprises local residents, users and tenants of the Centre and reflects the local population of the area. MCA has no income of its own but is supported by the Manager of the Centre, who is employed by Bradford Trident. MCA felt that this was a good time to be involved as a case study so that a smooth transition could take place from NDC funding of the Centre to a sustainable and viable voluntary sector community facility. It was felt that this case study would provide lessons of wider relevance for other TSOs working in similar circumstances to develop viable sustainable revenue funding for community based capital projects.

Worcestershire Association of Carers (WAC)

WAC is a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee in 1998, primarily funded through social services. It works to support carers who care for a family member or friend, adult or child, who is disabled, ill or frail. WAC has over 2,500 carers on its database, with most providing 20 or more hours of care per week.

In terms of services, WAC provides a helpline, benefits advice, a newsletter and handbook, carers' groups, a carer's emergency card and GP registration card. The organisation is also involved in publicity and events aimed at increasing awareness of its services amongst hidden carers. These also serve to raise awareness of issues relating to caring and carers amongst the general public.

WAC is very much a user led organisation: 30% of trustees and directors must be or have been a carer; this must include the chair or vice chair and only members (carers or ex-carers) can vote at the annual general meeting. In 2005/6 the total income of the Association was £139,000. WAC employs a three part time staff including the Chief Officer, and three full time staff.

WAC had faced closure in 2004 due to funding withdrawal by the local authority. At that time it consulted with local carers, reviewed its strategy, developed a business plan and obtained further sources of funding from a variety of funders. These new funding streams are due to run until 2007 or 2008, making 2006 a crucial time to review progress, plan ahead strategically to meet the needs of carers locally and ensure a wide funding base to maintain the viability of the organisation. It was felt that WAC would provide a useful case study for other TSOs seeking to maintain and diversify funding.

3.0 Key messages and findings from the case studies

About this section

This section highlights the key messages from across the case studies, illustrates a number of 'practice points' for other TSOs seeking to develop strategy and directs TSOs to further information about some of the approaches used.

3.1 Ensure there is a clear and up to date vision and mission

In the day-to-day running of an organisation it is easy to lose focus on the bigger picture. Strategy is about the bigger picture: the context you work in, the needs of your users, the passion of your staff and volunteers and your desire for things to be different.

The environment that TSOs operate in changes rapidly. This means that vision and mission need to be revisited every two to three years or so, when major changes are expected in the wider environment or when the organisation is planning for the future and thinking strategically.

But this is not about developing a paper-based statement of good intentions. The vision and mission statements should be actively used to test to what degree any new developments, services or projects contribute to the vision and the mission, so that the efforts the organisation makes contribute to the intended purposes. New trustees should be recruited with a focus on the organisation's vision and mission.

Practice point

It is important to distinguish between vision and mission; vision is the ideal state a project or organisation wants to see and what it is focusing on moving towards. It describes what complete success would look like. Mission is the more precise and specific contribution the organisation hopes to make to the overall vision. DA21 revised their vision and mission statements and agreed to adopt a new name, Dorset Sustainability Exchange, to reflect their new clarity of purpose that resulted from the process.

Dorset Sustainability Exchange (formerly Dorset Agenda 21) revised vision and mission statements

Vision

By 2015, people living in Dorset and the organisations based there, will be living and working in a way that minimises their impact on the planet. They will be more aware of where the things they use and eat come from, which will help them to make choices that are more environmentally friendly.

They will be living and working in buildings that are energy efficient – using less energy, and with more of their energy coming from renewable sources; they will be eating more food that is grown locally without the use of harmful chemicals; a greater proportion of the things they buy and consume will come from local manufacturers and producers, or directly from the manufacturers and producers; they will be creating less waste – using less packaging and recycling more; and they will think more carefully about the way they travel and move about – travelling less but when they do, using modes of transport that are energy efficient and less polluting.

Mission

Dorset Sustainability Exchange (DSE) will help people living and working in Dorset to minimise their ecological footprint and impact on the planet. DSE will enable individuals and organisations to be better informed about environmental issues and have easier access to practical solutions and products that will help them to make changes that will benefit the planet. DSE will achieve this through:

- being a central focal point for organisations working on environmental and sustainability issues
- having an easily accessible centre, providing information to the public, enabling them to gain access to energy-saving and environmentally friendly products, and offering meeting space
- providing education and training on environmental issues
- campaigning and working with individuals, communities and decision-makers to take action towards more sustainable living
- working with businesses and public services, providing consultancy and advice, to help them make their organisations, products and services more energy efficient and more environmentally friendly.

Whilst it is still early to assess exactly how DSE will use these new vision and mission statements, the clarity and fullness of the statements will serve to *keep them on course* towards ideas and actions closer to their vision and mission and steer them away from things that could distract them.

3.3 Connect strategy to the values of the organisation

Previous discussions⁴ and the experience of this project underlines the importance of ensuring that the strategy development process is connected to the driving values of the organisation; that is, the reason it exists and the passion and purpose that people bring to it. In rethinking strategy, it is valuable to do this first. It can remind everyone involved of what they have in common and can also highlight any important distinctions or nuances of meaning between people. Generally, this is a positive experience on which to then build more difficult discussions about priorities and conflicting views.

Practice point

At away days or other gatherings, use icebreaker exercises to give everyone a chance to say something about what motivates or inspires them in relation to the work of the organisation. Advocacy West Lancs found that whilst this took a little time, this was important to connect everyone present with their underlying values and reasons for involvement in the process of advocacy. Everyone got to hear what everyone else had to say and this was motivating, inspiring and set a good tone for the rest of the event.

⁴ Performance Hub, Strategic Planning expert workshop, 8 November 2005

3.4 Ensure a focus on outcomes

Much of the process of developing strategy involves turning general ideas into quite specific and precise plans. The process of defining exactly what results (or outcomes) the organisation wants to achieve and what it wants to do, provides focus and helps it to consider other related possibilities, which it then may decide not to pursue. Being very clear and specific does not come naturally to everyone. Yet it is essential in order to test and challenge assumptions, clarify expectations, plan effectively, prioritise actions, budget accurately and ultimately to evaluate the degree to which the organisation has been successful.

Practice point

Be very specific about what the organisation wants to achieve and make sure that outcomes and outputs for plans are clearly identified. DA21 had not thought in such a concrete way before about expressing measurable outcomes rather than their more generalised overall aims (for example, of the reduction in greenhouse gases) that they would never be able to measure, nor could realistically be directly attributed to their work.

The CES Planning Triangle (also known as Weaver's Triangle) was one tool that helped Dorset Agenda 21 develop a clear and concrete purpose for a specific project in Dorset schools, in clear language, which distinguished between outcomes and outputs.

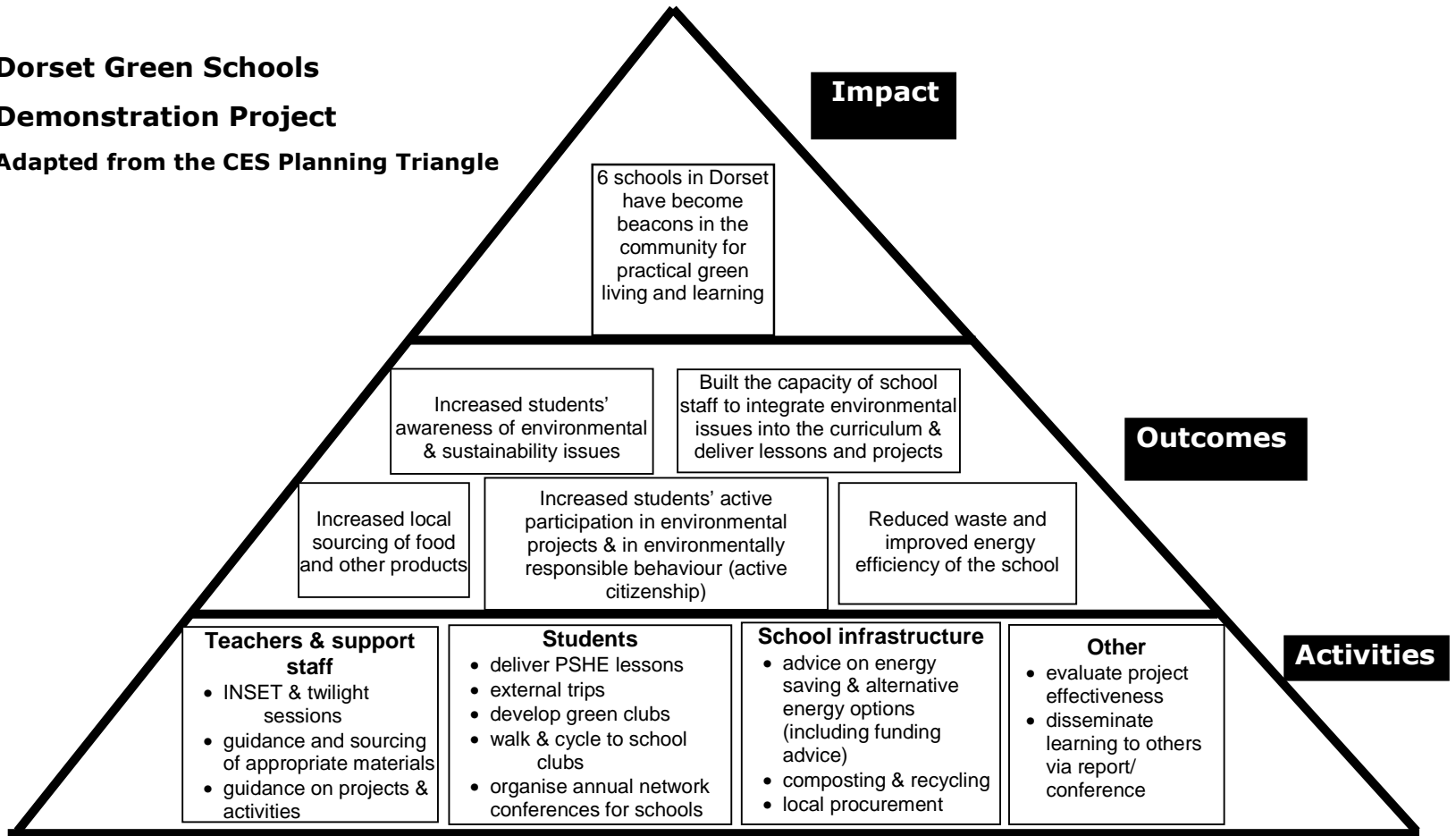
The CES Planning Triangle⁵

In the example on the following page, the base of the triangle is made up of activities (outputs), the outcomes feature in the middle layer, and the wider impact of the work sits at the top of the triangle.

⁵ See the Charities Evaluation Services website www.ces-vol.org.uk

**Dorset Green Schools
Demonstration Project**

Adapted from the CES Planning Triangle



3.5 Be appreciative

Using appreciative inquiry can be useful in developing vision and mission and is a good way to connect to the values of the organisation. It is a useful starting point. This can take the form of focusing on the strengths of the organisation, its people and relationships. Or it can take the form of focusing on what is inspiring about other organisations (qualities and activities) that can help those developing strategy to articulate how they would like their organisation to become.

The traditional approach to strategic change is to look for the problems, undertake a diagnosis, and find solutions. The main focus is on what is wrong or broken, rather than what has worked well; since we look for problems, we find them. By paying attention to problems, we emphasise and amplify them. Many TSOs start on the diagnostic, problem-solving path too readily: they don't take time to reflect, evaluate or take stock of what they have achieved.

Appreciative inquiry takes quite a different starting point:

Appreciative inquiry suggests that we look for what works in an organisation. The tangible result of the inquiry process is a series of statements that describe where the organisation wants to be, based on the high moments of where they have been. Because the statements are grounded in real experience and history, people know how to repeat their success.⁶

Appreciative inquiry is an exciting way to embrace organisational change. Its assumption is simple: Every organisation has something that works right – things that give it life when it is most alive, effective, successful, and connected in healthy ways to its stakeholders and communities. Appreciative inquiry begins by identifying what is positive and connecting to it in ways that heighten energy and vision for change⁷.

Practice point

Try asking some questions that focus on positive appreciations:

- What other organisations do you admire or are inspired by?
- What qualities do these organisations have that you admire?

Dorset Agenda 21 started their first meeting on the development of a new strategy by using this simple appreciative inquiry technique. The group identified other environmental organisations that they admire and are inspired by. They identified the admired qualities these organisations have and what they do. This is a more concrete way to 'dream' about the potential possibilities for your own organisation.

6 Annis Hammond S, *The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry* (Thin Book Publishing Company, 1998)

7 Cooperrider D, Whitney D, and Stavros J, *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook: The First in a Series of AI Workbooks for Leaders of Change* (Lakeshore Communications, 2003)

3.6 Acknowledge and celebrate what the organisation does well

Acknowledgement and celebration of achievements is important; being appreciative can help to do this. Many organisations do not take time to reflect on how far they have come, or to celebrate their progress. This can be useful starting point for thinking about future direction.

Practice point

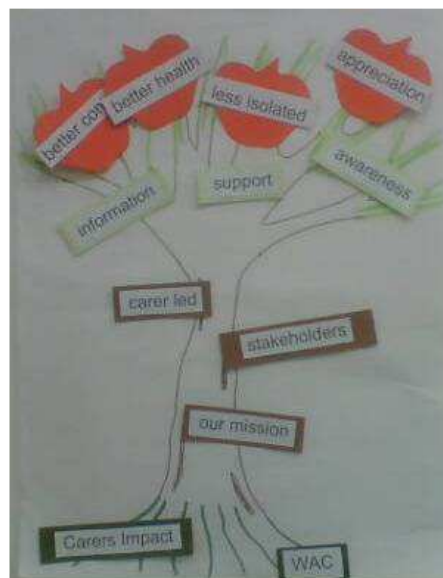
Recognition of the history and development of an organisation or project can be helpful as a basis for re-motivating people and moving forward. ACIA found that using the tree metaphor at the beginning of the process helped them all to see how far the organisation had grown from its roots.

Using the Project Tree

This is a tool to encourage people to talk to each other about their project. They are asked to think of their project 'as a tree' where the tree symbolises the project in the following way:

- What are the **roots** of the tree? (Where has the project come from? What is its origin or history?)
- What is its **trunk**? (What is the project's central philosophy or core values?)
- What are its **branches**? (What activities does it undertake? How would you group its main activities?)
- What are the **leaves** and **fruits** on each branch? (What are the expected outcomes/differences that the project hopes to make?).

There is clearly scope to go further to extend this analogy and be quite creative.



An example of a project tree: WAC

3.7 Plan and manage the process

Finding time and space to think can be difficult and it can be even more difficult to turn the ideas into concrete, specific plans. Despite, or perhaps, because of, the daily demands of running a TSO, it is valuable to have a clear, specific timescale to develop the strategic plan.

Practice point

Setting a timetable for the strategy planning process is useful. As part of a wider project, the case studies had to agree to work within a certain process and structure. Despite the tight timing, there was value in the discipline of that process. Worcestershire Association of Carers made a virtue of necessity of a tight timetable and scheduled a series of consultative meetings, sometimes back-to-back, to ensure they were able to meet their deadline of developing a strategy and business plan by the autumn.

As well as the specifics of *what* the process will include, the *way* in which the process will operate also needs to be well thought through and managed. It is important to think through *at the start* how to involve trustees, key stakeholders and others in the strategic planning process. Thought must be given in advance about how to genuinely consult with and involve users and how to manage diversity of opinions, ideas, needs and interpretations. There may be forthcoming events or other opportunities for engaging with stakeholders and service users.

Strategy sessions themselves also need to be carefully planned and managed so that time is allocated to the different elements of the task and to ensure that people move on from the 'dreaming' or visioning stage or tackling the more specific, concrete questions. Tasks may need to be allocated to smaller groups, either on the day itself or over the forthcoming period.

Practice point

'Planning to plan' is a useful way of thinking about your approach to the tasks you will need to accomplish. At the outset you will need to think about:

What do you need your strategy to achieve?

How will you do this?

Who might take on different tasks?

- Plan the strategy development process in advance and share out tasks which play to different strengths. This can also make the process seem more concrete and help to promote ownership.
- Make sure that the trustees are fully on board. The support of the trustees will be vital to ensuring the necessary changes are able to be implemented.
- Piggyback activities wherever you can and where it will not detract from what you need to achieve.
- Set yourself a timetable for developing the strategy so that the energy of the organisation is mobilised over a relatively short time period. Avoid major religious festival and holiday periods. Include key milestones so you can chart your progress.
- Ensure that relevant staff and trustees or board members are booked in for

- stages that are vital for them, such as stakeholder meetings or an away day.
- Make sure you include the time and money spent developing and monitoring strategy in each funding bid. Guidance from central government has made it clear that it is legitimate for organisations to charge on a *full cost recovery* basis; receiving funds to cover a proportion of your central or overhead costs as well as for the direct costs of delivering the project⁸.

3.8 Ensure collaboration in the process of strategy development

The process of developing strategy is critically important in producing an effective strategic plan. This should be a collaborative process, rather than one person's responsibility or that of a separate working group. Strategic plans should not be developed in isolation by lone working chief executives and rubber-stamped by trustees. Developing strategy is rather like having a series of conversations. These work best where there is a mix of different people. Often it is the only chance people get to talk to others who are involved in the wider organisation, so perhaps trustees will talk to service users for the first time. The numbers of people involved is also important; although there is not a magic number, there should be sufficient to ensure that all key parties are represented and you get a genuine mix of perspectives, so there are for example, staff from all levels, service users, trustees, people from partnerships agencies and so on.

Practice point

Never underestimate the power of involving all stakeholders and of mixing them up in the same event, although do also think about what will genuinely support full participation by people with less confidence or capacities. Advocacy West Lancs invited a range of their contacts, partners and other stakeholders and attracted a good mix of people to a collaborative event to kick-start their strategy process. This included staff, volunteers, partners from statutory services, advocacy partners, service users and trustees. This was a new experience for many there, allowed some new conversations to happen and created a real buzz.

Similarly, Dorset Agenda 21 invited other organisations to a meeting to help them to gain new ideas for future projects and to develop ideas for closer collaborative working. During this meeting, they heard how other organisations value and appreciate what they do, which in itself, was a morale booster.

3.9 Be clear about your stakeholders

Stakeholders are any group or individual for whom an organisation would change what it does and how it is done. Quite often the jargon used can obscure what is needed rather than illuminate. A common example is to talk about 'stakeholders' without checking with others and with ourselves exactly who is meant. It can be a useful step to name your stakeholders. It is much more useful and practical to identify a person (or at least the post within an organisation) who is seen as being a

⁸ For more on full cost recovery, visit NCVO's Sustainable Funding Project website www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/sfp/?id=6380

crucial stakeholder. This will help to prioritise amongst them and decide whom to talk to first. Consider which stakeholders are most important given the values of the organisation. Make sure all the right stakeholders have their say and recognise that there might be conflicts of interest between different stakeholders: consider where the power lies and how to balance any conflicting interests.

Practice point

Don't be vague - name stakeholders in discussion with others developing the strategy. It's quite easy to overlook potentially useful stakeholders and funders.

Mayfield Community Association was able to be much more specific about their stakeholders as a result of clarifying their thinking through a series of conversations and an away day. The discipline of the process of being much more specific about what they wished to achieve helped them to do this. One exercise that was useful at the away day was for everyone to write down on post-its '*what would get people through the door?*' Their responses were displayed and reordered into three categories: existing activities, things we don't do now and things we might do more of. This led onto discussions about who might fund such activities. After the away day, the project worker was able to think more widely about potential funders and stakeholders who had not previously been considered. It was then possible to identify specific contact people within organisations and outline expectations about what each stakeholder might do, giving them a more concrete basis on which to approach potential funders.

3.10 Encourage active user involvement in strategy development

It is particularly important to think through how service users, a key group of stakeholders, will be involved in the process and what format will allow them to contribute effectively. Tokenism must be avoided; do not simply involve the people that the organisation always talks to or invite people but then not give them a chance to challenge or speak freely by the way the session is managed.

It may be better to go direct to service users, slotting the 'strategy' discussion into an existing meeting or forum, rather than expecting them to come to the organisation for an extra session, although some of the case studies had success in involving some service users in this way. It will probably be necessary to do a bit of both approaches to make sure there are plenty of opportunities for different people to air their views.

There is no magic 'right' number of service users to talk to in this process. It is the quality of engagement that counts. Organisations should ensure that they include a range of people's views and that numerically small or dispersed groups of service users are not overlooked.

Practice point

There are different ways in which service users can be consulted on an individual or a more participatory basis. In order to consult with service users more directly, Worcestershire Association of Carers devised a simple questionnaire, posted to a sample of carers and carer organisations; this achieved an overall response rate of 28%, which is typical of postal surveys. This technique was useful given the rural

area, where the membership is dispersed and would be difficult to get together. However, there were concerns that there was a bias towards responses from older carers. In contrast, small-scale group discussions worked well for Advocacy West Lancs who included service user views through learning disabilities service user network and mental health service user groups. Open Space Technology also offers the potential for large group engagement amongst greater numbers of people, including service users (see the next practice point for details).

3.11 Step off the beaten track: try out new methods to promote conversations

It is important to think critically about the approaches and methods that can be used to develop ideas for strategy development. Many TSOs are not very confident about how best to seek the views of stakeholders or service users. They tend to fall back on questionnaire surveys. These often do not get good responses and are very limiting. In any case, they do not usually promote an energetic conversation about vision and purpose of the kind that is needed.

There are lots of methods that can be adapted for purpose and which are more creative and energising than traditional methods. It is important to take people out of their usual 'space' or comfort zone in order to get them thinking differently. This might mean literally going somewhere else for a strategy session and trying something different out of get the conversations off on the right footing. A good test of a method is to ask "*what quality of conversation is likely to result if we use this method?*" The best approaches are often those that bring a mix of people together to discuss and share their views.

Practice point

Do not be afraid to try something new. Visual methods worked well in a number of case studies. Worcestershire Association of Carers did a visioning exercise of where the Association should be in five years' time. This used postcards to generate ideas and produce a collective storyboard to display the themes identified. This material was used to develop a larger storyboard to display at the October event of all the case study organisations.

Advocacy West Lancs also used postcard images to encourage conversations and help people to express quite difficult or complex ideas; these were then linked to small group work to create posters to convey developing thinking to the larger meeting. This helped the larger group see the common themes and issues emerging. The rest of the event was organised on 'open space' principles; volunteers hosted a series of small group conversations on the issues that most struck them from the posters. Feedback from a final plenary session was then recorded. AWL had seen the principles of 'open space' in advance so they knew the event was going to be rather different. This, together with a progression from the postcards exercise to slowly build trust, was probably an important factor in overcoming any initial scepticism about a new approach.



Choosing postcards at WAC



Reviewing posters at AWL

Open Space Technology

Open Space Technology⁹ is an adaptable, engaging and enjoyable process which can be used with small and large groups of people, allowing individuals to host small group conversations which happen simultaneously over the period of time available, on the issues that most concern them. Participants choose which conversations they want to be part of and are able to move around to join other conversations.

⁹ Owen H, with Stadler A 'Open Space Technology' in Holman P and Devane T *The Change Handbook - Group Methods for Changing the Future* (Berrett-Koehler 1999)

There are four principles of Open Space Technology:

- *Whoever comes are the right people* – the people with the energy and commitment are the ones who will give up their time to work on an idea. Focus on who is there, rather than who is not.
- *Whatever happens is the only thing that could have* – this is about letting go of control, allowing in surprise and opening up to real learning, drawing on those 'experts' who are present.
- *When it starts is the right time* – don't wait for some specific person to arrive; begin with whoever is drawn to the discussion.
- *When it's over, it's over* – if the task takes less time than you thought, move onto something else. Otherwise, if it is deeply absorbing, continue until it's finished.

Open Space also has one law, 'the law of two feet', which says that if you feel you are neither learning from nor contributing to a discussion, you are required to get up and move to another discussion, without waiting for the group to complete its conversation, so that your fresh insights and creative thoughts can be used elsewhere.

- *Open Space Technology is one way to enable all kinds of people, in any kind of organisation, to create inspired meetings and events. In Open Space meetings, events and organisations, participants create and manage their own agenda of parallel working sessions around a central theme of strategic importance, such as: what is the strategy, group, organisation or community that all stakeholders can support and work together to create?*
- *Open Space works best when the work to be done is complex, the people and ideas involved are diverse, the passion for resolution (and potential for conflict) are high, and the time to get it done was yesterday¹⁰.*

3.12 Visit another organisation to gain inspiration

Being part of a wider project helped the case studies get over some of their isolation and they were able to realise that the challenges they faced are shared by other organisations working on a range of issues, in diverse communities across the country and providing quite distinct services.

Practice point

Similar benefits may accrue by finding other organisations that may be working on very different issues to share experience. Visits to similar and inspiring projects are also useful. Use existing networks, local umbrella and national organisations to help to find suitable contacts. The Director of the African Community Involvement Association found that a 'one person away day' to Glasgow to attend a service-planning meeting of local agencies focused on the local African population's needs, helped them to reflect on how ACIA might be able to manage running services in distant and diverse locations, where they have few relationships. Following this visit, the Director presented a short position paper to the trustees, which recommended that they should not try to develop satellite branches elsewhere. The

¹⁰ See: nspaceworld.org/

visit had helped to clarify that ACIA would not be able to run services at a distance without risking the services that they already deliver because this would require focusing effort outside of their current sphere of activity.

3.13 Consider new and unmet needs

Service users are the people who you are already reaching. The review of strategy should involve wider thinking about who you are not reaching and perhaps should be. In the development of a strategy, you will need to consider how you can include the most excluded, hardest-to-reach people who might need the service most but who are least likely to use it.

This might entail a specific needs analysis exercise to investigate unmet needs more fully¹¹. A needs analysis is a form of evaluation activity which can also provide baseline data against which change can be measured. It may be based on local data in the form of existing organisational records or newly collected data. Local or national statistics and reports may also be useful, but since many 'hard-to-reach' groups may be small in number and will not necessarily show up in statistical data, it will be essential to seek out and talk to potential users and other stakeholders and organisations. This need not be an extensive exercise, but should include a range of people with experience of the issue that you are interested in.

Ideas for new developments or services should be based on an assessment of need and of the organisation's strengths and experience and should not detract or dilute the core purposes or services of the organisation just because they seem like a 'good idea'.

As a general rule, it may be easiest to implement new projects or interventions to new client groups where there is transferability of some of the knowledge or experience that already exists within the organisation, in order to convince potential funders that this is the next logical step for the organisation and its strategy.

Practice point

The chances of being successful are likely to be greater if future plans are based on something that the organisation is already doing, so that it can be developed from a base of existing experience. The Africa Community Involvement Association agreed that it should change and widen its remit, to catch up with the fact that they were already delivering beyond their founding mission.

There was disagreement about the scale and scope of what they should deliver and the discussions illustrate some of the potential pitfalls. One approach proposed was that ACIA should develop a social enterprise; an idea for this had been to develop a second-hand clothing export business to South America although it was agreed that this was a non-starter. Other ideas included opening a charity shop or an African restaurant. However, a better approach suggested by the consultant could be for ACIA to look for opportunities to sell its experience of setting up a community-led service as a developmental consultancy in other areas. This could be as a funded pilot in a small number of areas, or could be marketed to individual primary care trusts. There could also be opportunities to develop the *African Eye* magazine into a

¹¹ See *Further monitoring and evaluation* (Charities Evaluation Service, 2002) and other CES publications.

social enterprise, raising advertising revenue through those targeting all types of products to the African market. This illustrates that potential new projects not only need to be matched against vision and mission, but are more likely to be successful if they build on the expertise and experience accumulated within the organisation.

3.14 Acknowledge tensions and address diversity

Forming a strategy will involve articulating and discussing differences of opinion within organisations. While difficult and challenging, this is an important part of clarifying your organisation's aims and can help create a strategy with buy-in from across your organisation.

It is important to allow divergent views, needs and tensions to be heard, acknowledged, and considered. This will be helped by the approach to the process, building trust and confidence so that people feel genuinely able to say what they think in a constructive way. It is important to pay attention to the barriers, which will hinder some people from giving their views, so make sure there are a range of opportunities for people to express their views.

Sometimes people find it easier to say 'difficult' things in pairs or small groups than to identify themselves by speaking directly to a large group. Another approach that works well is to explicitly ask for people to offer firstly, their ideas or views about possibilities and secondly, any tensions, questions or issues that feel important. Using pictures or visual methods is often a good way to generate metaphors which allow people to talk about both more inspiring visions for the future and the more tricky, difficult issues that inevitably arise.

Practice point

To build confidence and draw people into a process, work on issues progressively from pairs, to small groups to larger groups. Mayfield Community Association did this during their 'away day' even though there was not a large number of people present. This allowed members who normally would not find it easy to say what they thought to actively contribute to the discussions.



Building up conversations in Bradford

3.15 See the big picture first, then share out the tasks

It is important to get an overview of all aspects of the vision for the organisation; to see the 'big picture' before settling down to work out how the different aspects should be tackled. Many of the issues will be linked; so for example, name change, new premises, communication, attracting volunteers, getting funding, meeting needs and so on, may all need to be tackled but decisions made about one element will impact on other tasks. Much of this work needs to happen simultaneously; cross-group communication will be essential to avoid developing plans in isolation from the other elements.

Practice point

Setting up small working clusters or groups is a good idea to work out the detail of implementation. Advocacy West Lancs divided up key tasks amongst staff and trustees. Mayfield Community Association formed small sub-committees or working groups to take on the task of organising open days and stakeholder consultation events. In both cases, this relieved the pressure on the staff involved and broadened out responsibility for strategy development.

3.16 Use existing information to inform thinking and planning

Most organisations have vast amounts of information and data collected through a multitude of approaches including service user registration information and feedback, activity data and so on. Often too much information is collected and many organisations do not actually make much use of it. They may lack the skills, time, know how, or may not realise the value of the information they have.

Analysis of existing data may be useful just to demonstrate the kind of impact the organisation is making, as a kind of stock-take. This could then feed into publicity or promotion material or applications for funding. This may also help to see what information is needed and to revise collection procedures if the right kind of information is not being collected.

Practice point

Review and analyse the existing monitoring and evaluation information you have to provide evidence of the difference your organisation makes for funders and any publicity or promotional material. If you do not already do this as part of your monitoring and evaluation, take a 'big picture' approach to all the information you have. What does it say about the changing needs of your users and your organisational performance? What implications does it have for your future strategy?

Advocacy West Lancs wanted to do this, but found that, like many similar TSOs, their available data was not useful in demonstrating the outputs and outcomes of the work of the project.

3.17 Establish a monitoring and evaluation framework for the strategy

Many organisations struggle to identify and measure their outcomes. There are often practical and technical difficulties in measuring outcomes in a systematic way. However, establishing a revised monitoring and evaluation framework should be seen as part of the task of developing a new strategy and business plan and should be a discrete, fundable activity.

Practice point

Typically, organisations collect information on their activities and outputs, rather than on their outcomes or impact. Seek advice about how best to capture the outcomes of your work in a simple, but appropriate way.

Advocacy West Lancs had lots of anecdotal and unsolicited qualitative information about outcomes for individuals they'd worked with, which provide a positive view of the work of the project. This kind of information is really valuable, but needs to be collected and analysed in a systematic way and collated into a format that could be used to provide evidence of the impact of their work with professional partners and funders. They are now hoping to get discrete funding to assist them to develop better monitoring and evaluation systems to support their new strategy and business plan.

3.18 Find a critical friend

Small TSOs are often isolated and run the risk of imagining they are alone in the problems they face. Leaders of organisations too often work in isolation, without a place to test their ideas or to stretch or challenge them. Trustees are effectively their employers so they may not have the freedom to use their trustees to their maximum potential in this way. Similarly, staff that they manage may not be appropriate for a number of reasons, for instance, they may not feel able to be honest due to their subordinate position, or could be worried by unfiltered plans or ideas. An independent person at the right level at the right experience (either paid or unpaid) can be invaluable as a 'critical friend'¹².

All the case studies benefited from having an external facilitator for their strategy project who adopted a 'critical friend' approach. All the participating organisations highlighted that this was one of the most important things that they appreciated during the action research process. Whilst the consultancy input was for a relatively small number of days for these projects, costs could be a constraint, so it is important to budget wisely to get the most from the process. Another option could be to seek out individuals in other TSOs, perhaps from other areas of interest, with which to form a reciprocal 'critical friend' arrangement. Think about what skills and capacities you have in-house and where an external, independent input may be most powerful. External consultants should work *with* TSOs to develop strategy, rather than delivering it *to* them; the input of even a few days time can be valuable

¹² This term appears to originate in self-appraisal processes in education in the 1970s. A definition is provided by Costa A and Kallick B 'Through the Lens of a Critical Friend' *Educational Leadership* 51 (2) pp49-51 (1993)

if used in a way that works with the existing strengths and capacities of the organisation.

Practice point

Critical friends should:

- listen more than they speak
- ask good provocative questions
- help clarify ideas
- encourage specificity of meaning and interpretation
- take time to fully understand the context of the work being undertaken
- understand the desired outcomes of the work being undertaken
- offer value judgements only when asked
- always respond with honesty and integrity even if by doing so risks giving offence
- act as an advocate for the success of the work.

3.19 Final reflections

The experience of this project and of wider experience of working with TSOs suggests that one of the biggest challenges is to take the time to step back from the day-to-day frantic business of running an organisation, to focus on the *important* but not necessarily *urgent* business of thinking about the future.

At present, different parties at different levels within TSOs make decisions about strategy; sometimes they are made by a chief executive and rubber-stamped by a board, at others there is no wider buy-in to the proposed direction. Whilst TSOs need clear leadership, there need not be a tension between clear strategic leadership and dialogue about strategic direction. Indeed, this dialogue is essential to ensure buy-in and involvement.

A key learning point from this project is that many stakeholders and partners are much more willing than is often assumed to get involved in the strategy process and that TSOs should make the most of their goodwill and expertise.

Increasingly funders are demanding that TSOs develop an outcomes focus: that they '*start with the end in mind*'. Yet, very few TSOs monitor and evaluate the success of their strategies. In our experience, it is rare for there to be an evaluation of previous strategy. As a result, few TSOs have a clear evidence base to demonstrate their strengths or the needs which they seek to meet, both of which are the basis of a good forward strategy. What evaluation there is tends to focus at the operational level; board members rarely have a good understanding of the degree to which the organisation they are part of is delivering the strategy. It would be useful for board members and trustees to take a more active ongoing interest and to identify a small number of measures that would help them to keep track of progress.

Time spent in dialogue about the strategic tasks of reflection, review and evaluation, visioning, relationship building, planning, developing focus and anticipating challenges will reduce the amount of time that is expended fire-fighting,

managing crises, stress and burn-out. Many TSOs are trapped in a vicious circle of frantic action, problem-solving in isolation from each other and 'fixes that fail'. Typical patterns include:

- the hasty implementation of a solution that alleviates the symptoms of the issue, but where the unintended consequences of the 'fix' exacerbate the problem.
- failure to consider more fundamental solutions to issues and simply to apply the usual way of working.
- the pursuit of actions which, whilst individually beneficial, do not take account of related actions elsewhere which may result in overload and diminishing benefits for all¹³.

We endorse the need for an approach that values and makes time for the strategy development process. This should be appreciative, reflective, participatory and outcomes focused. It should value the knowledge and expertise of all stakeholders. It should bring stakeholders together to enable dialogue about values and purpose across the wider system and acknowledge and value the complexity and connections across the environment in which each TSO operates.

¹³ Harries J, Gordon P, Plamping D, and Fischer M *Elephant Problems and Fixes that Fail, The story of a search for new approaches to inter-agency working Whole Systems Thinking Working Paper Series* (Kings Fund, 1999)

Annex: Detailed case studies

Case study 1: The challenge of breaking from being reactive to being proactive, African Community Involvement Association

Introduction and background

African Community Involvement Association (ACIA) was founded in 1994 to respond to the needs of African people living in London affected by HIV and AIDS. Based in Mitcham in South London, ACIA's staff team of four and its team of volunteers have delivered information and advice about a range of issues for people from African communities living with HIV (services, treatment, immigration), facilitated peer support groups, and provided other practical assistance. ACIA's services have adapted over time as the needs of the communities have changed, due to the introduction of effective life-saving anti-retroviral treatments. As the rate began to slow at which HIV positive people were dying from HIV-related infections, ACIA introduced new services such as programmes to help people return to the labour market and tackle discrimination at work.

As ACIA's reputation for being able to reach people from African communities grew, it began to widen its scope and work on other issues affecting the communities, such as substance misuse. In 2006, ACIA launched a free, high quality glossy treatment support magazine, *African Eye*, the first of its kind for African communities living in the UK.

In a climate of rapid change, ACIA has managed to survive where other African community-based TSOs have lost their funding. Further changes to the HIV sector represent a threat to ACIA's survival unless it can continue to adapt to the changing environment it operates in.

ACIA applied to become a case study as they wanted to build the sustainability of the organisation. Reductions in the mortality rate of people living with HIV have allowed HIV to slip down the spending priorities of public sector health and social care funders. Despite an increase of central funds to tackle HIV and sexual health, the decentralisation of spending responsibilities to local primary care trusts (PCTs) without ring-fenced HIV budgets has meant that many PCTs have diverted money to other health priorities. Finally, the increasing lack of sympathy towards asylum seekers, refugees and migrants has made the climate in which ACIA works more difficult.

With funds from Charities Aid Foundation, in 2004 ACIA bought in a consultant to develop a strategic business plan for 2005-10; but ACIA were not making much progress towards realising the plan, particularly in the area of developing a social enterprise to generate new sources of funding. So ACIA hoped to move closer to realising its hopes in this area with the help of the Consultant.

How did we work together?

Meeting other case study organisations in the programme-wide inception event in June was a real eye-opener to the team from ACIA. They realised that many of the problems that they faced, especially the struggle to secure funding, were shared by other TSOs working in different domains. It was helpful for staff from ACIA to realise that the challenges they face are not just because they are an African-led organisation, or because they work in the HIV domain.

The preparatory exercise, developing a project tree that ACIA had to undertake prior to coming on the inception event helped them to take stock of where they are:

"It gave us a sense of purpose, by recognising where we are at, and the distance we had travelled within our organisation since it was founded in 1994."

Working with the Director

After reading key reports, papers and the strategic plan, the consultancy began with a meeting with the Director to plan the scope of the work and the next steps.

During this meeting a number of areas were identified that needed to be addressed:

- the need to update ACIA's mission – the mission in the business plan was based on ACIA's founding mission, to assist members of the African community affected by HIV and AIDS. In 2005, the organisation started delivering substance misuse education and prevention programmes, primarily to young people, on behalf of the local Drug Action Team. This represented a widening of their mission, yet their mission statement did not reflect this. It was decided that this should be presented to the trustees for discussion.
- the need to plan ahead to prepare for current changes in statutory commissioning of HIV services. The South London HIV commissioning consortium intends to commission fewer, larger contracts (initially due to take effect from April 2007). Therefore, there was a need for ACIA to develop formalised strategic partnerships or a consortium with other relevant HIV TSOs working with African communities in South London. The Director and the Consultant discussed the range of partners. Several were identified with whom ACIA should meet with to develop a formal partnership agreement, so that when the commissioning papers came out, they would be better prepared to respond as a larger unit, with agreed protocols and ways of working.
- focusing on ACIA's aspirations to develop services outside of London to serve the needs of Africans who have been dispersed to other areas of the UK through the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). ACIA has a number of former clients that have been dispersed to other areas in England and Scotland through the dispersal programme led by NASS. Many of these clients continue to contact ACIA for support as few culturally specific HIV support organisations exist in many of the places where they have been dispersed. ACIA was contemplating whether it should attempt to develop its operations beyond South London to try to meet these needs. The Consultant knew of an opportunity in Scotland, where the Director could go and test out his thinking. This was a large service-planning meeting, organised by the local NHS, focused on the needs of the developing African population in Glasgow. The Consultant secured the Director a place on the event, and some of the grant provided by the Performance Hub was used to cover the travel and accommodation. The Consultant asked the Director to think of his participation in the event as a one-person away day – ACIA was not attending to develop the provision of services in Glasgow, but to reflect on the issue of how ACIA might be able to manage running services in distant and diverse locations, where they have few relationships. Following the one-person away day, the Director was asked to develop his thinking and present a short position paper to the trustees.
- developing a social enterprise – ACIA's most recent strategic business plan included developing a social enterprise. This was to be a second-hand clothing export business to South America. This unusual idea stemmed from the a thriving but saturated market in the export of second-hand clothing from the UK to a number of African countries, and a former board member's links to South America, where there appeared to be no parallel provision. But no moves had taken place to develop this business and it was clear that a rethink was needed.

Working with trustees

During the action research, two meetings were held with trustees. Following brief introductions, the first meeting started using appreciative inquiry. The Consultant asked the trustees to think about organisations that they admire and are inspired by. The trustees were asked to identify what qualities these organisations have that they admired and what they were doing. They were then challenged to identify how ACIA could move towards becoming more like the organisations they admired.

Position papers on the four topics discussed above were presented to trustees for discussion.

It was quickly agreed that ACIA should change and widen its remit, to catch up with the fact that they were already delivering beyond their founding mission. However, the scale and scope of what they should deliver was not agreed, and trustees were asked to consider this at their next meeting. Some of the ideas that were discussed were more realistic to implement than others.

The Director's paper on expansion outside London recommended that ACIA does not try to develop satellite branches elsewhere. The one-person away day had helped to clarify that ACIA would not be able to run services at a distance, without risking the services that they already deliver because this would require focusing effort outside of their current sphere of activity. Instead, ACIA should look for opportunities to sell its experience of setting up a community-led service as developmental consultancy in other areas. This could be a funded pilot in a small number of areas, or could be marketed to individual PCTs.

It was agreed that the original plan for a social enterprise, selling second-hand clothes to South America was a non-starter. Trustees were asked what activities could be developed into a social enterprise. These included opening a charity shop or an African restaurant. The Consultant pointed out that all of the ideas suggested represented entirely new activities to those that ACIA were already involved in, as was the case for their initial idea in their business plan. The Consultant suggested that they might have more chances of being successful if they could build their plans to develop a social enterprise out of something that they were already doing, so that they could develop it from a base of existing experience. The Consultant suggested that there were opportunities to develop the *African Eye* magazine into a social enterprise, raising advertising revenue through those targeting all types of products to the African market. It was agreed that the Consultant should facilitate a meeting with the editorial board and other stakeholders to explore this.

The second trustee meeting was cancelled at very short notice due to poor internal communication within ACIA and, following discussion with the Director, issues about commitment and capacity of the board were discussed. The subsequently rescheduled meeting focused on what ACIA needed to do to strengthen its board. Training on governance roles and responsibilities of trustees is urgently needed when the new board is appointed following ACIA's next AGM. This underlines the need to ensure full buy-in of trustees and good internal communication between chief officers and trustees.

Stakeholder meetings

The consultancy started in the summer and it was very difficult to organise the stakeholder meetings on strategic partnerships and the development of the magazine into a social enterprise. Potential dates for the meetings came and went, meetings were cancelled, and after four months, had still not taken place.

The urgency of the strategic partnership meeting became diminished because the timetable for changing the commissioning process was extended, due to a

combination of a lack of common agreement between the different funders in the consortium and complaints from providers.

Similarly, dates came and went for the facilitation of the stakeholders' meeting for *African Eye*, without any progress. ACIA has now received some developmental funding from a major grant-making trust to further develop the magazine, and the ideas to broaden its content and appeal have been taken on board, and the enterprise element will be built in gradually over the next year.

How far did we get in developing a strategy?

ACIA were able to work together with the Consultant to achieve some important shifts in their strategic thinking. However, by the end of the consultancy ACIA had not yet taken action to re-develop their strategic plan. They have their previous strategic plan, which could serve as a template document and it is hoped that they will be able to resume the strategic planning process in the future.

Evaluating progress and key lessons

The inability of ACIA to convene meetings unless they were absolutely urgent served to highlight that, like many other TSOs, ACIA is stuck in crisis management mode rather than being proactive. This both underlines the need to develop a more strategic approach and undermines the capacity to do so.

Further lessons of the process include:

- It is useful to 'step outside your sector' and connect with other TSOs from different domain areas or those which work with different communities. Exposure to diversity provides great scope for learning and appreciation of the particular contribution that each organisation makes, but also highlights common issues and provides access to wider resources and thinking.
- It is valuable to appraise your own 'distance travelled' and acknowledge the achievements of an organisation before developing a forward strategy.
- It is important to update organisational vision and mission to reflect the changing needs of the communities with which TSOs work and what the organisation is actually doing, so that the documentation reflects the realities and your efforts clearly relate to your agreed, intended purposes.
- It is important to think ahead to be able to respond to changes in the external environment and be ready for anticipated developments or opportunities, such as service contracting arrangements.
- Visits or away days are a useful way to test out ideas, even if they only involve one person.
- Ideas for new developments or services should be based on an assessment of the organisation's strengths and transferable experience and should not detract or dilute the core purposes or services of the organisation just because they seem like a good idea.
- Commissioning the drafting of a strategic plan to an external consultant as ACIA had done in the past can sometimes have the effect of 'contracting the thinking out'. TSOs that do this will not understand the time, effort and energy that goes into this process, will not own the plan nor make an effort to implement it.
- The commitment and capacity of key stakeholders such as a board has to be evident for a TSO to be able to take part in an effective strategy development process and have the skills and drive to push the staff to be more proactive.

Case Study 2: Widening ownership of the strategy process, Advocacy West Lancs, Ormskirk

Introduction and background

Advocacy West Lancs (AWL) is a small third sector organisation based in Ormskirk, Lancashire that was established in 1994. It provides volunteer advocates to assist with representation and support for any member of the community who may be vulnerable and who has difficulty communicating with health, social or other statutory services. It is a registered charity, which presently employs six staff and works with 10 volunteers. Advocacy is provided free of charge. The local primary care trust, social services, the Big Lottery, Comic Relief and several other funders who offer smaller pots of money, fund the organisation.

The advocacy process seeks to work *with* people, not do things *for* people, to work alongside them in a partnership approach. AWL provides advocacy for groups or individuals who may be vulnerable due to age, physical or mental illness, disability or frailty. Advocacy can enhance quality of life, help people to develop self-advocacy skills and give them more control and involvement in their lives.

AWL runs a variety of advocacy projects. At present this includes:

- Generic work for the general population; issue based short-term work for individuals.
- 'People Power' for people with mental illness; a hospital based service for in and outpatients.
- Mental health service user inclusion; to enable user participation in the development and planning of services. This facilitates a local mental health service user group, called 'SUITS ME' and sponsors a social inclusion project called 'Let's Have Coffee'.
- Dementia project; this works to empower and include people with dementia and provides community education.
- Learning Disabled Service User Development Project; sponsors and facilitates a local service user group 'SUN', that links service users and their views directly into the development and implementation of local services via the local Partnership Board.

Over the last few years, AWL had held strategy days with staff and done a SWOT and PEST analysis on the organisation. This led to the development of a business plan in April 2004. Although this was not based on the involvement of all stakeholders or the board of trustees, it did help to put much of the necessary infrastructure in place for a growing organisation.

Since summer 2005, AWL has had a new 13 member board of trustees, recruited through external advertising. These developments made the time right for the organisation to address longer term strategic planning through the project to enable continued growth and stability of the charity. The grant provided by the Performance Hub funded the strategy day and travel to the events in Birmingham.

How did we work together?

The Consultant worked closely with the Managing Director (MD). The MD and two trustees attended the inception event in June 2006.

After a review of the previous business plan and related documents and discussions with AWL a plan for a strategy day was devised. This event was held in July 2006, facilitated by the Consultant. AWL invited a range of their contacts, partners and

other stakeholders and succeeded in attracting 21 people to the event, including staff, volunteers, partners from statutory services, advocacy partners, service users and trustees.

The first exercise was based on appreciative icebreaker questions that everyone had a chance to respond to. These were:

- What interests you or excites you about advocacy?
- What drew you here today?

Whilst this took a little time, it was important to connect everyone there with their underlying values and reasons for involvement in the process of advocacy. Everyone got to hear what everyone else had to say and this was motivating, inspiring and set a good tone for the rest of the event. A typical comment was:

"It's really special when you see how you can empower people and when you do get a good result – that's all you ever want really!"

The group then moved on to use images from postcards to help them to talk about underlying issues and tensions in a more relaxed and engaging way. These were discussed in small groups and developed into a series of posters. When the posters were reviewed amongst the whole group it was startling to see the common (and perhaps surprising) themes across them.

"I had thought one of our key strategic issues, besides the inevitable sustainable core funding, would have been about the service itself. I was surprised when the core issue was, in fact, that we are doing a good job and reaching the right people with the right services, but we need to communicate and promote advocacy and the organisation more and better."

Communication was a very strong theme, both in terms of the need to promote the work of the organisation, but also to "spread the word" about advocacy itself by acknowledging, celebrating and demonstrating the impact that it can make.

The rest of the event was organised on 'open space' principles; people were asked to volunteer to host small group conversations on the issues that most struck them from the posters and discussion to date. This led to three small groups looking simultaneously at communication, promotion and remit.

The day was well received and provided a deeper understanding of what the organisation is about and what it is trying to achieve. People worked together well. The staff were particularly pleased with the wider involvement in the event, which allowed some new conversations between people:

"I am really excited – what I saw today was the growth in understanding. It jazzed me up and excited me so much. What I saw was relationship building that just leapt - moved to a much higher level. Trustees have met staff, staff have met trustees, service users have met staff, volunteers have met staff, they've met trustees - but nothing like this; nothing like everybody coming together as equals and feeling totally comfortable."

The event was discussed that evening at a meeting of the trustees, attended by the Consultant. The need to bring in the views of service user groups and establish a monitoring and evaluation framework were identified.

A further meeting with the MD and a trustee looked in more detail at the necessary next steps, timescales and identified some specific issues that would need to be addressed including;

- What do we already know about existing service users?
- Where and with whom is it most important to build our profile?
- Partner agencies
 - How best should we approach them?
 - What are their agendas?
 - Does what we offer support them?
- Can we analyse and write up our existing information on the quality and impact of our services?
- Inclusion of service user views through learning disabilities service user network and mental health service user group.

The Consultant drafted a short report of the key issues identified at the strategy day and subsequent meetings and a suggested action plan. This was considered at a further meeting of trustees, where it was also decided that smaller working groups would be established to share out the work necessary to take the strategy development forward. The MD has led on involving service users in the process. Consultations occurred with the local mental health and learning-disabled service user groups sponsored by Advocacy West Lancs.

The remaining consultant time has been used to review and analyse the existing monitoring and evaluation information. It was hoped that this could be written up in a way that could be used with specific target audiences for promotion and publicity material, as well as providing evidence of impact for funders.

However, the task of reviewing the available data has illustrated that there are a number of issues about the inadequacy of available data to provide a sound evidence base for the impact of the work of AWL. Despite recent efforts to improve monitoring systems, the data available is not reliable and is therefore not useful in demonstrating the outputs and outcomes of the work of the project. Like many organisations, AWL faces practical and technical difficulties in measuring outcomes in a systematic way. They have quite a bit of unsolicited qualitative information about outcomes for individuals, which provide a positive view of the work of the project from amongst the partners. However, there is a need to consider how the 'soft' outcomes of the project can be collected and analysed in a more systematic way and collated into a format that could be used to provide robust evidence of the impact of the work of AWL with professional partners and funders.

How far did we get in developing a strategy?

AWL plan to finish consultation with service user groups and bring together all the information gathered so far in time for a further strategy day in October 2006, which they will facilitate. It is intended that this will develop more concrete goals to form the core of the next three-year business plan.

Evaluating progress and key lessons

The project has allowed AWL to move from thinking about strategic planning to actually doing it. The process provided a structure and momentum to move ahead. The project moved the board of trustees as well as the stakeholders into actually thinking strategically, instead of just talking about it.

The lessons of the process include:

- Never underestimate the power of involving all stakeholders and of mixing them up in the same event.
- Do not assume a stakeholder, whether service user or trustee, won't or is not able to have valuable input into the strategic planning process. AWL found that they had members who they had previously thought didn't care or understand their core work; in fact, they were actually very concerned and interested, but had never been asked what they thought until the strategy day.
- Do not underestimate the empowerment that happens to any individual at any level when they are listened to and their contributions are treated with respect.
- 'Open space' was very liberating and worked well. The format allowed people to feel comfortable enough to engage in the issues they had knowledge or passion about.
- Be prepared to try something new; using postcards was also new to us and very useful in allowing people to get involved and to think in an entirely different way about the organisation. It also created camaraderie and good will to start the day.
- Be prepared to be surprised. Insights from stakeholders themselves may surprise or challenge you. These are valuable and underline that involving diverse and interested stakeholders is a key and very necessary part of the strategic planning process.
- Strategic planning is fluid and organisations must be ready to respond to emergent issues.
- External facilitation of planning processes can break down barriers and create open thinking; in an ideal world this should be available throughout the process.
- Establishing a robust and reliable monitoring and evaluation framework should be seen as part of the task of developing a new strategy and business plan.

Case study 3: Making environmental sustainability financially sustainable, Dorset Agenda 21

Introduction and background

Founded in 1995 as a community-based forum for advising Dorset County Council on sustainability issues, Dorset Agenda 21 (DA21) has outlasted many other local Agenda 21¹⁴ initiatives in other areas and has nearly 100 members. It became incorporated as a charity in 2003/4. But although DA21 has been working hard to raise awareness of sustainability issues (social, economic and environmental sustainability – energy, food, homes, transport), and has built a solid reputation for its networking, signposting and partnership working with other organisations in the sector, it had not been able to attract sufficient resources at a level that enabled it to employ sufficient paid staff to realise its aspirations. The energy of trustees and other volunteers has been generously donated to enable the organisation to run its activities, but at a high personal cost to the unpaid Co-ordinator.

Based in a very small office in Dorchester, DA21 employed two staff at the time that it applied to take part in the action research on strategic planning: one member of staff delivered the Community Choices for Sustainable Living project, which involves working with primary schools on environmental projects, and four community action groups working on topics such as setting up a car club and a renewable energy project; and another was employed on a short-term contract to conduct research on behalf of Dorset ChangeUp Consortium to investigate the potential for closer collaborative working between sustainability organisations in Dorset.

DA21 wanted to develop its strategy to help it make a step change in size and capacity by growing its income base from approximately £25,000 to a level where it could employ more staff to deliver more activities and initiatives, as well as to employ a co-ordinator.

The lack of success in attracting significant funding was not an issue facing DA21 alone. A recent article published in *Trust and Foundation News*, by the Association of Charitable Foundations¹⁵ reported that less than three percent of grants made to charities went to environmental charities. Given the concerns about climate change, recycling and sustainable development, this figure is very low.

But given the relatively recent emergence of green/environmental issues on the mainstream political agenda, it was believed that this was an opportune moment for DA21 to make a step change, and was one of the reasons for its selection as a case study project.

How did we work together?

Working with trustees: Following on from the initial meeting in Birmingham in June 2006, the Consultant facilitated an evening meeting of the trustees in July. The relaxed and informal session in one of the trustees' home, focused on the vision for the future of DA21.

¹⁴ Local Agenda 21 initiatives were set up by most local authorities in England to take forward the action from the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992 (also known as the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. Agenda 21 is a comprehensive plan of action to be taken globally, nationally and locally in every area in which humans impact on the environment.

¹⁵ Lee M and Cracknell J 'Where the green grants went: patterns of UK funding for environmental conservation', in *Trust and Foundation News* June 2006.

Following brief introductions, the meeting started using an appreciative inquiry technique: the Consultant asked the trustees to think about organisations in the same sector as DA21 that they admire and are inspired by. Trustees were asked to identify what qualities these organisations have that they admired and what they were doing.

Trustees were then invited to work together in pairs to develop their vision for the organisation over the coming years. Much of what the pairs of trustees had to say chimed with each other. There were two main areas of disagreement between trustees: the degree that DA21 should make links with the business and commercial sector; and the degree to which DA21 should promote consumer products/gadgets and social enterprise (reduce consumption versus more ethical consumption). It was noted that both of these issues related to raising funds, through either sponsorship or sales, and that some of the trustees had negative attitudes about income generation through trading. Yet this was at the heart of DA21's current dilemma that to make a step change, DA21 needs to act in a more business-minded way to achieve its goals.

One of the areas of agreement between trustees was that they wanted to broaden the supporter base for DA21. The Consultant asked trustees if they felt that the language used in the organisation's name, vision and mission, were sufficiently understandable and accessible to the wider supporter base that they wanted to attract. It was agreed that these were not in simple, clear plain English. Some time was spent exploring how these could be simplified.

Finally, the issue of member benefits was reviewed. There were no tangible membership benefits, as all services and products are currently available to members and non-members in the same way. The trustees were asked to think about whether they should be introducing member benefits or if membership is just a way of formally acknowledging support for the organisation.

A paper was written up by the Consultant following the meeting, outlining the options for the new name, vision and mission. These were reviewed by the trustees at a subsequent meeting, amended, and accepted. They will need to be endorsed by the membership at the next annual general meeting.

Working with the Co-ordinator: The next step was to spend a day working with the unpaid Co-ordinator, who is a trustee. The following areas were discussed:

- the urgent need for some funds to appoint a paid co-ordinator to help it achieve its aspirations for a step change – a number of approaches to achieve this were discussed, including developing a proposal for a time-limited capacity building step change project, funding for a part-time/full-time co-ordinator post (for six months to a year), with a target of developing between two to four distinct projects (depending on size and scale) which under the principle of full cost recovery, would contribute to a co-ordinator's salary costs beyond the initial period.
- the need for DA21 to become more outcomes-focused in its funding applications for projects. The Consultant introduced a simple programme logic tool, the CES Planning Triangle, to help DA21 to ensure that all its future project applications are framed in this way. This is reproduced earlier in the report, on page 20.
- an outline for a three-year schools demonstration project – we worked through an idea to develop a well-resourced project to deliver whole school environment and sustainability initiatives in secondary schools, building on their success of working in primary schools. A project plan was prepared to be used in fundraising.

- closer collaboration partnership/networking – we worked through ideas and options for how the work that DA21 had undertaken for the Dorset ChangeUp consortium could be taken forward to develop closer collaboration with other like-minded organisations. These ranged from developing consortia through to co-location. A position paper was prepared for trustees; and a meeting was planned to bring stakeholders together in November.
- what could DA21 sell? – this had been the most contentious area at the previous meeting with trustees. A range of options were discussed about the products and services that DA21 could sell, which fell broadly under four categories: training, consultancy, advice, and products. A position paper was prepared for trustees.

The Consultant has acted in the role of an informal mentor to the unpaid trustee Co-ordinator, speaking frequently on the phone, and offering support, encouragement and advice. During this period DA21 was focused on trying to get funding, often responding to small local pots of money and organising an office move. They were trying to position themselves more strategically and encouraging collaboration and partnership with key stakeholders.

Facilitating a stakeholder meeting

The conclusion of the consultancy with DA21 took the form of an external stakeholders' meeting. DA21 invited other organisations to a meeting to help them to gain new ideas for future projects and to develop ideas for closer collaborative working. Eighteen participants attended the half-day meeting, facilitated by the Consultant. As part of the introduction process, each participant was asked to say why they had prioritised coming to the event, and what it is that they most appreciate about DA21. These ranged from their ability to coordinate networks of people and organisations, their focus on action, their widely recognised reputation, and the fact that they always stand by their promises and deliver, through to personal appreciations about positive experiences of working with some of the staff and volunteers. This set a positive tone for the meeting and the unpaid Co-ordinator heard how other organisations value and appreciate what DA21 does, which in itself, was a morale booster.

Following a presentation by the Consultant about the progress of the strategic consultancy, participants (including some of DA21's local funders) were asked to guess DA21's turnover for the past year. Many participants were truly surprised at the low level of funding, and for the first time, some realised the truly precarious nature of DA21. The Co-ordinator said that she could never have exposed the funding situation so clearly, and that it needed to come from an external "respected" person.

The bulk of the meeting was taken up by participants generating ideas for projects that DA21 could take on to boost its income, based on perceived gaps and things that needed to happen; and ideas for collaboration were worked up, including an important local climate change coalition, to be led by DA21. Several participants volunteered to form a joint steering group to take this on. The Consultant used a very 'light touch' to facilitate these conversations, merely giving instructions for the group work, putting people into groups and facilitating feedback.

In closing, the Consultant invited DA21 trustees to reflect on what they had gained from the meeting and to consider how they would use the 'investment' of their external partners' time at the meeting to take forward their strategic planning process.

How far did we get in developing a strategy?

Although much has been discussed and developed, DA21 remains in a catch 22 situation – without the funds to pay a co-ordinator, the organisation has limited capacity to write a new strategic plan. A new strategic plan has not been written yet because the project took place over the summer when the Co-ordinator was on leave or has needed time off. However, progress has been made:

- the consultancy has helped DA21 to “turn us around in our orientation, to be more focused about how those outside see us and to be more conscious about being accessible to others”.
- trustees have adopted a new, more up-to-date name for the organisation, Dorset Sustainability Exchange, as well as vision and mission statements.
- trustees have become more focused on the need to move towards becoming more of a delivery agent, running projects and offering specialist advice. “It has helped us to have a more skilful approach to fundraising”. This was a shift in thinking from seeing themselves previously as an advocacy, lobbying or pressure group that delivered some small-scale practical projects to generate income to meet basic costs.
- some trustees still have reservations about becoming more commercial, but have also recognised that DA21 needs to be financially viable and professional.
- DA21 has moved offices and become co-located with another voluntary organisation.
- DA21 has generated awareness among its supporters of its need for more resources.
- concrete ideas for joint projects and closer working have been identified with partner organisations.

These significant practical changes in a relatively short period of time were achieved because DA21 was more aware of its need to become an outcomes-focused delivery agent, which enabled it to openly express its desire to undertake or facilitate joint projects or closer partnership working. It was this explicit request for closer collaboration with their partners that brought about these changes.

The external input has been much appreciated:

“We have been delighted to take part in this project. We have really appreciated [the Consultant’s] input... the encouragement and positive angle has been great and has supported us through a period made difficult by over-commitment”.

“it has helped us to realise that we are still in our infancy as an organisation and that we have been trying to do too much... we are still learning to crawl and it has helped us to manage our expectations, that we are not yet ready to save the planet!”

Evaluating our progress and key lessons

Despite the fact that DA21 have not yet produced a new written strategy document, it is evident that there has been a substantial shift in thinking about the future direction of the organisation, including agreement to change their name (to Dorset Sustainability Exchange), which they had initially vociferously rejected.

The lessons of the process include:

- Being ‘appreciative’ is a valuable approach; it helps connect individuals to their larger purpose in being involved in a project, stretches vision about what might

be possible and allows disagreements to be discussed in a more positive environment.

- Applying for funding to help an organisation make a step change is a legitimate activity.
- It is important that TSOs are outcomes focused when they are undertaking strategic planning and development. This assists in refining and clarifying core purposes. It is also expected by funders and supports a more appropriate approach to monitoring and evaluation.
- Articulating vision and mission clearly to yourselves and then to other partners is an important first step to enable new possibilities to emerge for joint working and projects.
- External input can be a valuable resource; however, it takes time to build up relationships of trust and respect that allow for a more robust exchange of views. Informal and relaxed approaches to strategy development can be just as effective as high-level meetings. Engagement with trustees is particularly important where there are small numbers of paid staff.
- TSOs have to be prepared to engage in a process of assessment of their strengths and weaknesses in an open, honest and positive manner. They should expect to be challenged and to have their thinking subjected to scrutiny.

Case study 4: Beyond the day to day: looking at the 'bigger picture' together, Mayfield Community Association, Bradford

Introduction and background

The Mayfield Community Association (MCA) was formally constituted in January 2006 to support the development and use of the Mayfield Community Centre. The Centre is a former old people's home in the Marshfield neighbourhood that was extended and developed for community use as part of the New Deal for Communities programme (NDC) by Bradford Trident. Bradford Trident is the community led company working to transform the Park Lane, Marshfield and West Bowling areas of Bradford. It was formed in 2000 to deliver the government's New Deal for Communities programme.

The initial development of the Centre was overseen by a Steering Group of local residents, elected members and officers of Bradford Trident. The Centre opened in November 2004 and is funded until March 2008.

The neighbourhood of Marshfield is located to the south of the city centre of Bradford. It has higher levels of youth unemployment and long-term unemployment rates than in the city as a whole. It also has a significant proportion of young people and those from black and minority ethnic communities.

The MCA comprises local residents, users and tenants of the Centre. Most of the members are original members of the steering group that established the Centre. Membership of MCA reflects the local population of the area and includes representation of young people, local schools and local youth groups. MCA has no income of its own but is supported by the Manager of the Centre, who is employed by Bradford Trident.

At present the Centre is used for a variety of community activities, including recreation, leisure and education and is used by people of all ages and from different ethnic backgrounds. It has a café run by a separate company and provides office accommodation for several organisations, both public and private sector. The rental income subsidises the use of the community centre by local people and community groups.

The aim of the MCA is to improve the quality of life in Marshfield and adjoining neighbourhoods by providing and encouraging the use of the facilities at the Centre. The Centre is intended to be accessible and open to all those in the area, reflecting the diversity of the area and bringing the different communities together. In relation to the future, the task of the MCA is to develop a strategy to allow a smooth transition from an NDC funded centre to one that is a fully sustainable and viable voluntary sector community facility. They are required to meet a 'test of organisational fitness' by Bradford Trident to ensure governance, financial and management viability before transfer of responsibilities for the building.

The grant provided by the Performance Hub funded the away day and travel to the events in Birmingham. The remaining amount will fund the publicity and running costs of the two open days to be held in November 2006.

How did we work together?

The Consultant worked closely with the Centre Manager and MCA members. The project came along at a good time, as the MCA had begun to think about the need for forward planning and the involvement of an external facilitator hastened this process and helped to ensure that it wasn't seen simply as the responsibility of the Centre Manager.

The Consultant visited the Centre in July 2006 and held meetings with the Centre Manager and a member of staff from Trident. These identified the following issues in relation to the development of strategy:

- A need to articulate and agree a shared vision and mission in relation to the Centre.
- Identification of specific strengths.
- Identification and analysis of different stakeholders and consultation with them.
- Audit of existing information about local needs, future issues and opportunities and threats.
- Identification of outcomes and a way of measuring them.

This was a lot to tackle in a short time. The priority was for MCA members to clarify their vision for the Centre and to generate some momentum for MCA to take on the rest of the tasks.

An away day was held later in July 2006, facilitated by the Consultant and attended by eight members of the MCA. The event started with an appreciative icebreaker to explore individual's motivations for involvement in the MCA. The group then went on to explore the vision for the MCA and identify strengths, ideas and tensions around future development, using postcards. These were developed collectively into posters in two groups. There was then an informal contribution from the Centre Manager on the financial situation and future prospects.

The Consultant provided some 'outsider' reflections on the Neighbourhood Action Plan 2004, which detailed the needs of the area, and this was followed by a 'graffiti board' to collect more specific ideas on what the Centre could do to meet those needs. The group then reviewed the posters and identified key issues to be discussed further. Two small groups held working discussions on the themes of:

- How can we work with other agencies and voluntary organisations so that they provide the activities we want to see in the Centre?
- How can the MCA work more with the community (now) to make sure the MCA is grassroots led? How can we tell the community what we're doing? How can we find out exactly what they want from us? How can the MCA get more young people involved and do more for young people and children?

The small groups then came together to report back and discuss the next steps.

There was a strong sense that the MCA was currently trying to do too much; "we *can't be everything to everybody*". Becoming more strategic involved clarifying the unique contribution that the MCA could make to the needs of the area, given its remit in relation to the Centre itself. In summary, the key issues identified through the day were:

- The need to clarify the remit, responsibilities and respective roles; this included how the MCA committee functions, the respective roles and responsibilities of the MCA and the neighbourhood action group and the role of Bradford Trident.

"We don't know what decision or roles we can make at the moment"

"What we've got is an organisation that is led from the top...what we want is an organisation that's led from the bottom.....maybe we've got to think of a way of changing it round?"

- The specific mission (role) of the MCA and the Centre in meeting the needs of the neighbourhood, supporting but distinct from the vision for the area.
- Concerns about the financial situation and responsibilities for managing the Centre; *"we do not wish to see an empty building"*.
- Beginning explicit transition planning for handover of the building.
- A more deliberate, active, strategic approach to communication, including being more proactive to encourage usage of the Centre, ensuring what is provided meets local needs and demands and using all contact with local people to encourage participation in the MCA itself, including membership:

"We're telling the professionals what we're doing....not telling the community....the people who count...the really important people in the equation are the people that live in Marshfield..."

- The need for community development work, so that other agencies or individuals will provide activities on a voluntary or commercial basis in the Centre.

How far did we get in developing a strategy?

Following the away day, the Consultant and the Centre Manager drafted an outline strategy and action plan which was discussed by the MCA at one of their regular meetings.

This document was much more specific and targeted than previous ideas and discussions. For example:

- It identified an overall aim for the MCA, specific outcomes and activities and services (outputs) to be provided to meet those outcomes. Support to clarify and distinguish outputs and outcomes was provided by the Consultant.
- It identified very specific activities for different groups of people, who would be expected to provide them, and a target date for provision.
- It named the 'stakeholders' and specific contact people and outlined expectations about what each stakeholder might do.
- Potential funders were identified by name.
- It outlined proposals for two separate events aimed at professional stakeholders and local residents, inviting them to the Centre to familiarise themselves with what it has to offer and providing an opportunity to engage them more fully about their needs and potential contribution. This was an important demonstration of a shift to a more strategic approach.
- The MCA also agreed to form small sub-committees or working groups to take the task of organising these events forward.

Evaluating our progress and key lessons

The MCA strategy is still very much at its early stages, but the foundations have been laid. The MCA are planning to visit a similar Centre to see how they work, to undertake training in order to enable them to demonstrate their 'organisational fitness' and to clarify the respective roles of Bradford Trident and the MCA.

The lessons of the process include:

- The strategy process can provide an impetus to consider the bigger picture and to think laterally, aside from the day-to-day tasks of running an organisation or building.

- The ability to generate some momentum, excitement and involvement amongst MCA members about what was happening at Mayfield, what would be happening and how they could become involved.
- The value of being more specific and clear about stakeholders; the details of who they are and what they might provide, helped the MCA to consider activities and stakeholders they had not previously thought about.
- The need to make it fun and inclusive and involve all members to ensure they contribute, by using creative and participatory methods.

"The true value of our away day was involving members who normally would not contribute vocally with their thoughts and ideas. Our away day achieved that, getting 'quiet' members to share."

- The value of external facilitation and support, particularly for staff members.
- There are benefits of having a small budget for the specific purpose of developing strategy.
- The importance of planning key events outside main holiday periods and other unsuitable times.

Case Study 5: The need for a clear evidence base for strategic planning, Worcestershire Association of Carers, Worcester

Introduction and background

The Worcestershire Association of Carers¹⁶ (WAC) became a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee in 1998, primarily funded through local authority social services. The Association's mission is:

For the public benefit, to relieve the stresses experienced by carers and people with physical, mental or sensory impairment within the family or home in the county of Worcestershire, through the provision of information services, support centres and the promotion of needs of carers.

At the time of the 2001 census there were 57,000 carers in Worcestershire, 15,000 of whom provided more than 20 hours care per week. WAC has over 2,500 carers on its database, with most providing 20 or more hours of care per week. The October 2005 report to members indicated that there were 833 full members, defined as carers or former carers, 44 associated members, interested individuals who support WAC's mission, and 71 affiliated members who are groups of carers and organisations working with and for carers. The number of registered members has now risen to over 1,000.

WAC provides a helpline, benefits advice, a newsletter and handbook, carers' groups, a carer's emergency card and GP registration card. The organisation also arranges events to increase the awareness of its services amongst 'hidden carers', that is, people who may not consider themselves as carers or who may be reluctant to ask for help. These also serve to raise awareness of issues relating to caring and carers amongst the general public.

WAC is very much a user led organisation: 30% of trustees/ directors, of whom there are 12 in total, must be or have been a carer; the chair or vice chair must be or have been a carer; only members (carers or ex-carers) can vote at the annual general meeting. Primary (particularly carers) and secondary stakeholders are involved in strategic development, service development and evaluation. In 2005/6 the total income of the Association was £139,000. WAC employs three part time staff including the Chief Officer, and three full time staff.

The Association faced closure in 2004 due to funding withdrawal by the local authority. Determined to remain an independent local carer support provider, WAC consulted with local carers, reviewed its strategy, developed a business plan and obtained further sources of funding from the Big Lottery, Department of Work and Pensions and some renewed local authority funding. With these new funding streams due to run until 2007 or 2008, 2006 was a crucial time to review progress, plan ahead strategically to meet the needs of carers locally and ensure a wide funding base to maintain the viability of the organisation. Although the Association had undertaken reviews at project level, consulting with carers and professionals as appropriate, it had not revisited its overall strategic aims and objectives since generating the business plan for the period 2004-2007.

Application to become a case study in this project was timely for WAC; they were intending to write the next business plan for the period 2007-2011 by the end of October 2006. The funding provided by the Performance Hub enabled the

¹⁶ A carer is someone who cares for a family member or friend, adult or child, who is disabled, ill or frail, or has done so within the last ten years or is about to do so.

consultation process to be wider in scope and better analysed. It allowed for a suitable venue to be used for the three consultation meetings in July; additional staff hours to input and analyse the data; and Chief Officer 'time out' to consider the implications for WAC's strategic planning.

How did we work together?

The Consultant worked closely with a small working group comprising the Chief Officer and three of the Trustees over the summer of 2006. The priority for the organisation was to consult with all their key stakeholders over the summer prior to writing the business plan in the early autumn. In effect, the business plan and WAC's strategic document were synonymous.

There were three separate consultation events with staff and trustees, lead officers from the local authority's Health and Social Care departments and user representatives on partnership boards. Later there was a meeting between a trustee, the Chief Officer and three senior councillors from the local authority with lead responsibilities in areas of relevance to the Association.

In order to consult with service users more widely, a simple questionnaire was developed with the Consultant. This asked which services respondents had used, and then requested that they rank each existing and possible future service to provide a sense of their priorities. The questionnaire was posted to a sample of 375 carers and 47 carer organisations; this achieved respective returns of 104 and 14, an overall response rate of 28%.

Throughout this process the Consultant acted primarily as a facilitator, working closely with the working group. Sessions were recorded and analysed by the consultant. This enabled the key issues arising from each session to be fed directly into the discussions at subsequent sessions, reflecting back emerging issues to the group. In this way, ownership of the data and decisions about interpretation and action rested firmly with the Association. There was urgency to the process, given the need to deliver a business plan on time, and this tight way of working together generated a momentum which helped keep within the timescales of the consultation.

All the consultation sessions were given a clear overarching purpose. The staff/trustee session included:

- Welcome by a trustee and a round of introductions.
- A context setting presentation by the Chief Officer using the tree poster presented at the June Performance Hub event.
- An invited speaker with knowledge of excellence and innovation and what other carers' organisations were doing in the Midlands.
- Consultant-led, more participative sessions reviewing the activities that had worked well over the past three years, and what should be avoided for the future. This included a visioning exercise of where the Association should be in five years' time. This used postcards and a group-generated storyboard. The session concluded with the identification of possible areas of new work to test out in the other consultations.
- Closing comments and thanks by the Chair of the trustees.

The Consultant generated a more detailed storyboard for WAC from this exercise for the Hub event in October.

Immediately after this first consultation session, the working group met to identify the issues about which WAC wished to consult further in order to pave the way for a more collaborative approach. The subsequent session with lead officers centred on these issues and the prioritisation of existing and new areas of work that WAC should include in their new business plan.

The consultation with user representatives on partnership boards was an informal meeting with the consultant to discuss existing WAC services that could be developed or expanded and new services. Notes from this discussion formed an agenda for a further discussion with members of the working group. The discussion was encouraged to move from a sharing of individual experiences to one that looked more to the future and the prioritisation of existing and new areas of work that WAC should include in the 2007-2011 business plan.

These discussions helped to provide a clear focus for further consultation with the local councillors on three areas:

- collaborative opportunities with Adult and Community Services to provide a comprehensive service for carers within the locality
- their view of third sector involvement in the provision of services
- potential gaps in service provision in the light of new policy changes.¹⁷

This proved to be a useful opportunity to raise issues around carers and caring with a stakeholder group with whom the Association had relatively little contact, and to develop an appreciation of their viewpoint.

The consultation questionnaire asked carers about the existing service provided by the Association, their relative usefulness, and the future services WAC should offer. The questionnaire also asked for demographic information to build a profile of carers by gender, ethnic origin, and age and the cared for person's condition and their age. The findings were analysed in-house by one of the trustees.

Responses suggested that the helpline, benefits advice, and carer group sessions were the most valued services. In relation to suggestions for new services, two suggestions were that WAC should become a voice for carers in the county and the provider of a counselling service to carers. WAC were concerned that there seemed to be a higher proportion of responses from older people; this suggests that attention needs to be paid to the dangers of relying on a single method of consultation with service users and that particular efforts need to be made to reach those that may be less likely to respond to traditional methods of consultation.

How far did we get in developing a strategy?

The summary of emerging opportunities from consultations, the views of the councillors, and the analysis of the data from the users' questionnaire have provided the Association with a firm evidence base to write their 2007-11 business plan.

The emerging opportunities were summarised by the consultant under six headings:

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- Increased diversity of funders, users and services
- Becoming a 'voice' for carers
- Expanded service provision

¹⁷ See the Government's White Paper *Our health, our care, our say*, published in January 2006 www.dh.gov.uk/ourhealthourcareoursay

- Creation of a 'social enterprise' side to WAC
- Increasing the number of volunteers
- Increased physical and information accessibility.

Members of the working group commented:

"This process has put us in a position now where we can determine both the vision and the strategic plan objectives for the Association over the next five years."

"What did we get out of it? Well, the answer is we got a very clear view that informed our strategic vision for the next five years. We got a very clear view of what our stakeholders actually want."

This provided a good grounding. However, more remained to be done as WAC moved into the more concrete aspects of strategic planning, that is writing their plan and implementing it. One member of the working group characterised this phase as becoming "hard nosed" as the organisation moved from consultation to determining priorities:

"We have to look internally and make decisions about where we want to go and what's realistic, and then someone's going to sit down and put it together. What remains to be done is to put specific actions against the objectives as to how we're going to deliver it, and make some key decisions about how fast we want to go."

Summarising all the emerging opportunities was essential to enable WAC to move into that more difficult phase of actually writing the business plan.

Although the Association was confident that the strategic plan would be written by the end of October, the planning and then the implementing aspects of strategic planning should not be underestimated.

Evaluating our progress and key lessons

The action research approach to the consultation worked at several levels. The externally facilitated events enhanced WAC's credibility in the eyes of other stakeholders and enabled the Association to step back and reflect. The consultation process and the circulation of the edited thematically analysed transcripts amongst participants promoted ownership of the findings and enhanced WAC's relationships with stakeholders.

The Association valued having an external facilitator at the consultations: the contribution to the planning process, for example, being a member of the working group and yet external, and writing up the consultation reports were found to be particularly useful. The tree exercise, which initially seemed a bit laboured, provided a useful basic structure to start thinking about planning; and the storyboard postcard visioning exercise was enjoyed by staff and trustees.

The status of being selected as a case study clearly increased the credibility of the Association in the eyes of stakeholders. This enhanced the opportunities to tell people what WAC did.

Overall, the process provided a clear evidence base for strategic planning; it revealed to WAC what their stakeholders did not know about them and hence, the need for a more effective communications strategy.

The lessons of the process include:

- Consultation with stakeholders can generate ideas about new services and publicise what is currently on offer. It can also help map what else is happening in the wider area or region.
- The consultation process in itself can promote ownership of the findings and improve relationships with key stakeholders. It's an opportunity to make new contacts.
- Despite, or perhaps, because of, the daily demands of running a TSO and making funding bids, it is valuable to have a clear, specific timescale to develop the strategic plan.
- Tasks need to be shared out amongst trustees and staff, playing to all the experience and strengths within the organisation. Different roles include fronting consultation sessions, writing letters of invitation, meeting local councillors, drafting questionnaires, analysing the findings, determining priorities, writing the draft business plan, putting specific actions against objectives, and finally, deciding how fast implementation should be.
- The process may highlight the need to develop further skills and capabilities within the organisation, such as the need to update technology (e.g. computer hardware and software) and develop IT skills.
- It was helpful to have an external facilitator who stood apart from the Association and yet contributed to the planning of the consultation and writing up the findings. Chief officers of TSOs could often benefit from a sounding board from time to time: the job can seem isolated, even with ongoing support from committed trustees. Creative ways need to be found to provide external facilitation or 'critical friends', such as reciprocal arrangements involving other TSOs, to support or mentor each other through the strategy process.

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