

Disability Rights Commission

Learning lessons:
Partnership work
with the voluntary
and community
sector

Contents

Executive summary	Page 2
Introduction	Page 4
Background	Page 5
Local partnership working	Page 6
National partnership working	Page 8
Benefits and challenges of partnership work – for the DRC	Page 10
Benefits and challenges of partnership work – for VSOs	Page 13
Benefits and challenges of partnership work – for disabled people	Page 17
What has partnership working taught us?	Page 19
Conclusion	Page 23

Executive summary

The Learning Narratives project contributes to the broad legacy strategy of the Disability Rights Commission (DRC). It considers what the DRC has learnt through its various activities since 2000 and focuses on specific activities or over-arching themes where the DRC has had direct involvement.

Each narrative responds to questions such as 'why did we, the DRC, try to do what we did?', 'what worked?' and 'what didn't work and why?' and draws on a range of data sources, not least of which is the experience and expertise of DRC staff, both past and present.

Partnership work with the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) explores some of the benefits and challenges of partnership working between the Disability Rights Commission and a range of Voluntary and Community Sector Organisations (VSOs).

Partnership work with the voluntary and community sector: Key Lessons

- Increased partnership working has enabled the DRC to build a more trusting relationship between itself and disabled people's organisations (DPOs). This in turn has made the DRC a more transparent and accessible organisation for disabled people.
- More knowledge of the issues facing the VCS has enabled the DRC to act as an advocate on the VCS's behalf with national organisations such as the Big Lottery Fund.
- The 'ripple effect': resources and funding that the DRC have provided to some VSOs have enabled the

organisations to increase their customer base and provide advice and information to a far wider range of people in the local area than the DRC alone could have reached.

- The DRC found the most effective partnerships were when both national and local solutions for capacity building were identified.
- It is important capacity building activities build upon an organisation's core activity and not try to create entirely new activities.
- Successful partnerships work when there are mutual benefits to all organisations.
- The outcomes of partnerships should directly relate to the needs of stakeholders. These stakeholders should be directly involved in the setting up and implementation of these partnerships.
- A shared ethos is a crucial factor in making partnerships work.
- Partnership working can be resource intensive and therefore clear objectives should be identified and expectations managed accordingly.

Introduction

Throughout its lifetime, the DRC has undertaken a range of partnership working with various Voluntary and Community Sector Organisations (VSOs). Partnership working presents huge opportunities and mutual benefits for organisations, as well as a series of particular challenges. The DRC has played an important role in building the capacity of VSOs, as well as transferring and sharing its experience and expertise to these organisations. This narrative illustrates some of the benefits and challenges of partnership working the DRC and its partners have encountered.

Background

During the consultation to set up the DRC, feedback from organisations of disabled people and individuals indicated that disabled people wanted a central organisation with local representation and to be able to access their rights through existing resources such as Disability and Information Advice Lines.

Once it was set up, the DRC in 2002 / 03 undertook research into the capacity of existing organisations to respond to the information and advice requirements of disabled people. Most respondents felt that they could offer a service providing advice on the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) if they were provided with the following:

- training on the DDA
- resources to allow them to fund additional workers
- advice on providing an advice and information service to disabled people
- professional backup, such as contact with DRC caseworkers to advise on individual cases.

Local partnership working

As a response to the results of the research, in 2003 the DRC launched the Yorkshire Pilot Programme, a programme designed to support the capacity of advice and information services in the Yorkshire area. The pilot programme focused on identifying specific partners which could provide a basic advice and information service, using a contracting and interview process.

Choices and Rights

One of the VSOs the DRC partnered with as part of the Yorkshire Pilot was Choices and Rights, a disabled people's organisation based in Hull. To enable the organisation to develop their advice and information service, funding was secured from Yorkshire Forward, the Regional Development Agency. The funding was used as a pot of money to which Choices and Rights would charge their time when dealing with a request for information or a case. Each member of staff was provided with training by the DRC on the DDA – training which enabled the organisation to utilise five members of its staff to provide a DDA advice service. Such an approach had the added benefit of enabling a consistent service to be provided as opposed to having one part-time officer, and thus having to close the service during periods of illness or annual leave. In addition, staff members undertaking cases were provided with a DRC contact who could provide them with timely advice on specific issues relating to the case in hand.

The quality of the trainers has been really good, the materials are good and they know how to get the best out of people. The trainer managed the group dynamics well. **VSO representative**

The Yorkshire Pilot Programme ran for approximately twelve months. Whilst there were clearly some successes and good relationships developed, it was felt that to progress capacity building in this way was too resource intensive, and that a greater impact could be made by refocusing instead on national partnering opportunities.

National partnership working

Following the decision to move away from a locally-based partnership approach, the DRC worked in partnership with national strategic bodies. These included the Law Centre Federation (LCF) and the Independent Panel for Special Education Advice (IPSEA), to which funding was given by the DRC to enable the delivery of DDA services. In Wales, there were also a number of national partnerships, which included a sister project to the LCF through work with the Citizens Advice Bureau and a project with the Trades Union Congress.

The Independent Panel for Special Education Advice (IPSEA)

One of the national organisations the DRC formed a partnership with was IPSEA, a legal advice organisation providing free legal advice to parents and carers of disabled children and children with Special Education Needs (SEN) in the school system. IPSEA also works to improve policy and practice through campaigning and policy work. After a tendering process, the DRC outsourced their casework function for Part 4 of the DDA to IPSEA (ie education cases) and gave the organisation the financial support to undertake this work. IPSEA also undertook a transfer of expertise programme to try and improve disability equality awareness in schools and build capacity in other advice groups, such as parents, through talks and seminars on disability rights and legislation. This work took place nationally in various locations across England and Wales.

Citizens Advice Bureaux in Wales

There is only one law centre in Wales, which is inaccessible for many disabled people and only operates within one area in Wales. DRC Wales wanted an advice-based project to cover all of Wales and so developed a partnership with CABx to provide services in Flintshire and Newport (ie north and south Wales). In addition, training on the DDA has been rolled out through CABx throughout Wales with over 400 advisers covering 50 Bureaux being trained. Such training has also helped enable advisers identify a DDA case and to know what to do next.

Trade Union Project – Equal at Work

Learning lessons from work undertaken by DRC Scotland, the DRC developed The Equal at Work project. This was a two-year project, funded by the (old) Department for Trade and Industry, and ran by the Wales Trades Union Congress (TUC) with support from the DRC. Covering all six equality strands, Equal at Work was set up to support trade unions in Wales with promoting equality and tackling discrimination. This included raising trade unions' (TU) awareness of the rights and requirements of disadvantaged groups; developing a network of TU equality officers and equality agencies in Wales; and promoting awareness about new and existing equality rights for employees.

Benefits and challenges of partnership work – for the DRC

Building trust and accessibility

Increased partnership working has enabled the DRC to build a more trusting relationship between itself and disabled people's organisations (DPOs). This in turn has made the DRC a more transparent and accessible organisation for disabled people.

Initially there was a lot of suspicion and some people thought we were a load of 'jobsworths'. But the partnership work has built trust and has made the DRC more transparent. There is now more direct contact with senior officials and policy makers.

Member of DRC staff

As a result of this enhanced access, DPOs are able to raise issues and have a greater influence on the DRC's work. For example, there is now a black and minority ethnic (BME) disabled people's group that sits with the Chief Executive of the DRC to look at the impact of policies on BME disabled people. Furthermore, working with VSOs has been helpful for the DRC as an intelligence-gathering exercise, leading to a greater understanding of the advice sector and the challenges it faces.

Because we were speaking to organisations and working with them closely we realised there was an absence of funding for advice and information work. This meant we could strengthen their case to fund more information and advice with organisations such as The Big Lottery Fund. **Member of DRC staff**

More knowledge of this kind has enabled the DRC to act as an advocate on the VCS's behalf with national organisations such as the Big Lottery Fund. Partnering with VSOs also helps the DRC to connect with the grassroots:

Partnering connects the activity of the (DRC) to other worlds. For citizens that we are trying to serve this is important... we can bring this local expertise.

VSO representative

It means we're accessing specialist advice from niche providers and working with them which enables the Commission to get to the grassroots.

Member of DRC staff

Acting strategically and with authority

Partnership work with local and national VSOs has also enabled the DRC to work more strategically to meet their goals. For example, providing funding to organisations such as IPSEA and the LCF to deliver a DDA casework service has meant the DRC has been able to focus its efforts on choosing cases which will have the most impact for disabled people.

The law centres we partner with tell us what cases they have and we might want to take it forward if it's a strategic one with potential big wins. We still need organisations taking on the repeat case but we can now be more strategic.

Member of DRC staff

Partnership working with LCF has ensured a good supply of information on legal cases from 'on the ground' which has proved invaluable for the DRC. The DRC has also benefited from the niche expertise and larger capacity of some VSOs to take on cases and respond quickly to service users' needs.

We have expertise in our organisation of SEN and exclusion issues and could offer a triad of legal remedies for parents to reduce further disability discrimination. We had more extensive capacity and could respond a bit quicker (than the DRC).

VSO representative

In addition, joint work with other equality commissions led to more pan-equality working on cross-strand equality with the DRC being seen as taking a lead in this area.

Benefits and challenges of partnership work – for VSOs

Furthering rights for more people

Partnership work with the DRC has enabled VSOs to further the rights of disabled people in their community. This has happened in a number of ways, such as by raising awareness of the disability legislation (like the DDA) and the rights disabled people have.

(Since the partnership) we've had more people coming forward and asking if they've been discriminated against. **VSO representative**

People are more aware of disability discrimination remedies and consequently we will engage users in these options. **VSO representative**

Resources and funding that the DRC have provided to some VSOs has enabled the organisations to increase their customer base and provide advice and information to a far wider range of people in the local area.

We would not have got the skills on the DDA without the DRC – we've had at least 4 or 5 days training on this.

VSO representative

We have some of the people that the DRC were serving come to us anyway but we are now serving a whole new section. **VSO representative**

This has often happened with people that do not necessarily identify themselves as disabled through, for example, establishing links with VSOs such as the Alzheimer's Society or Cancer Care.

The ripple effect caused by funding and capacity-building by the DRC can also provide a model for partnership work in the future.

If (other relevant organisations) reaches out to other specialist organisations with expertise at an economic cost they are going to deliver much more complete services to the user and reach wider networks (than they might otherwise). **VSO representative**

Current funding provided by the DRC has enabled some VSOs to sustain and accelerate their growth to meet the needs of more disabled service users.

The partnership with the DRC enabled us to achieve our aim of providing a substantial disability equality advice service, from doing some working in this area to growing a really substantial service.

VSO representative

Increased profile

Moreover, partnering with the DRC has in some cases also helped to increase the organisation's profile at both a local, regional and national level.

Since we've been working with the DRC it's definitely increased our profile at a national level. The DRC have said lots of nice things about us and government departments and other disability organisations have rung us up asking about our work. It's helped us to get high profile people to come and speak at our conference.

VSO representative

When we've done funding bids we mention we have a working partnership with the DRC – it's difficult to say if this helps but I think it does. It's certainly impressed the local authority. We offered them places on the training provided by the DRC and they could then see the quality of training we were receiving.

VSO representative

These examples show how partnering with the DRC has led to an improved status for this organisation

No one else locally can say they've worked in partnership with the DRC. **VSO representative**

The benefit of experience

Another positive effect of partnership working is the experience it can bring to VSOs of working with a larger organisation. This was felt to be valuable learning which built the capacity of the organisation and would support future partnership work.

It's given us a better understanding of partnership work for the future. **VSO representative**

This is the first heavy partnership work we've done, the first time we've worked with another organisation on a day-to-day basis. Managing this process has been really helpful and will be useful for our work with the Commission for Equality and Human Rights. **VSO representative**

A shared ethos is a crucial supporting factor in making partnerships work. For example, one voluntary sector organisation stated:

You need an agreed ethos. Lots of funding streams now want partnership working but lots of local

disability groups are too medical model for us and we're keener to work with government departments. You just need to be clear about your ethos. **VSO representative**

Partnership working is not without its challenges. For VSOs, the short timescales and amount of information needed by the DRC when making the initial application was a particular challenge. This was especially the case for smaller organisations. The importance of having an identified contact at the DRC to talk to about the partnership work was also raised as being hugely beneficial and, once this was established, a system that worked really well.

Benefits and challenges of partnership work – for disabled people

As well as organisational benefits, partnership working has, most importantly, led to positive changes for disabled people. In one area, a number of disabled service users attended the DDA training provided to the VSO by the DRC. As a consequence, a number of disabled service users were more aware on disability rights and able to act as local advocates. As a result of the training, the organisation was also able to put more DDA advice into newsletters and communications to service users, which helped to raise awareness for both disabled people and the wider local community.

Capacity building such as training on the DDA has also had a ripple effect as local VSOs operate as local centres of expertise on the DDA. This can involve delivering training to smaller VSOs as well as providing advice to local VSOs if they need it. Building the capacity of smaller VSOs in this way means more disabled people are being reached and supported through this work.

In addition, the funding the DRC has provided to a number of VSOs and Law Centres to deliver a DDA service means that disabled people in most places in England are able to access a face-to-face legal advice service which is within fairly easy travelling distance from their home. This in turn has enabled the DRC to deliver one of its key strategic aims – to empower disabled people to access their rights.

We have substantially increased our services and as a result disabled people are having more of their needs met through casework. We are also offering different types of services such as attending hearings with service users. The DRC caseworkers weren't able to do this. **VSO representative**

This enhanced capacity was often seen as benefiting the most marginalised disabled people, since the support they might require normally involved fairly resource-intensive interventions.

What has partnership working taught us?

Work strategically to impact locally

Despite clear benefits resulting from partnerships with local VSOs, this model of partnership working required a high level of resource that made it unpractical for national roll out. The DRC therefore refocused the majority of its resources on working with national strategic bodies. Funding 15 Law Centres to deliver DDA services has meant that, in just over a year, some 2,000 DDA cases have been dealt with – far more than the DRC would have been able to deliver itself. Additionally, this has freed up the DRC to continue to develop the capacity of some of the smaller organisations with a view to them dealing with cases in the future.

Expectations and context

Throughout partnership working relationships, there had sometimes been gaps between what organisations hoped to get from the DRC and what the DRC could provide.

They (VSOs) thought we had money that we could give to them as a grant but this was a contractual arrangement with certain constraints and obligations placed on them. **Member of DRC staff**

An early clarity of expectations and ethos of both organisations is essential for partnership working. For example, one VSO's legal officers had previously worked at the DRC which meant they had a clear understanding of what the DRC did and did not do in terms of their casework structure and how the organisation could best supplement this in their own work.

Partnership work has involved developing relationships with different communities and different service providers across the public and voluntary and community sector. This at times has required a sensitive approach, as even amongst one community there are often difference of opinions. If development of this work is to continue then it is important the staff involved have a good understanding of the complex and sometimes difficult relationships between organisations.

Our officers tried to manage the politics between small VSOs not wanting to involve other VSOs.

Member of DRC staff

There can be a mismatch between the expectations of a partner organisation and the boundaries defining what the DRC can actually deliver. Building up a relationship of trust, mutual respect and understanding are useful supporting factors to partnership working to help allay these potential difficulties.

Resources

VSOs face many pressures on their resources and difficulties in staying afloat to deliver existing services. Their time and outputs are closely monitored by funders.

A lot of organisations get project funding for a year but haven't been able to secure additional funding so may have gone and chased other funding which causes divergent objectives and means they can't deliver the objectives we agreed.

Member of DRC staff

If larger partnership bodies want to utilise their experience and skills, then VSOs need to be adequately resourced to enter into partnership arrangements.

In addition, partnership working takes resources on both sides; thus, the DRC has had to fund its partnership working, as well as commit other suitable resources, in order to maintain its work as a priority:

We don't have the capacity to do it all and focus on it 100 per cent. Until recently there has been little money in this area from the Commission and to do this you need a serious injection of cash.

Member of DRC staff

Further, if a partnership arrangement does not involve money but is reliant on goodwill then there may not be the same level of commitment or accountability to the partnership work undertaken.

If there isn't a formal contract where money is paid then having to work with goodwill (can be challenging). There isn't the same leverage.

Member of DRC staff

Relationships

The disabled people's movement has changed considerably over the last few years. DPOs have begun to engage with statutory bodies and to have a profile with central government. There appears to be a shift in views on how DPOs should relate to charities. For example, some of the larger charities have over the last few years signed up to the social model of disability and are actively engaging and involving disabled people in the running and management of their organisations. However, DPOs are still at a disadvantage, since because of limited resources they often cannot give the time required to chase and apply for funding. Over the next few years, it is likely there will be more partnerships between the larger charities and DPOs – a prospect which may well result in an initial clash of cultures

for which there may need support from others in order to resolve the issues involved.

Funding

Advice work remains under resourced and is often supported by project funding or short-term funding. It is logical, therefore, that capacity building in terms of training will fall short of its objectives unless these organisations can reach a point of stability through core funding.

The provision of resources through contracts has enabled organisations to take forward specific disability issues, which would not be necessarily recognised by mainstream funders as important. However, in issuing contracts the pressures on organisations to secure funding – and their willingness to change their function in order to secure funding – needs to be borne in mind. VSOs often complain that current funding practices put them in a position where there are gaps in their funding whilst waiting for further funding to come in, creating a deficit in their accounts and making them look unsuitable for partnership arrangements. Whilst an organisation might have a general policy on working with DPOs, financial restrictions and procedures means that a relationship has to be rejected because of the VSO's quandary.

Conclusion

The DRC's Partnership Strategy has made significant inroads into the development of locally delivered 'Anti-Discrimination' advice and information services, through resourcing and supporting the development of Voluntary Sector Organisations.

However, in order to be truly effective, the work needs to be written into a long-term strategy for capacity building. Such a strategy needs to ensure that:

- There is a recognised and accredited programme of training for VSOs engaged in the delivery of anti-discrimination services.
- VSOs are resourced to deliver accessible, local services to diverse communities.
- VSOs are supported to continue their development beyond the delivery of formal 'Transfer of Expertise Programmes' eg updating their knowledge of the legislation and building peer networks with other organisations.
- VSOs (both mainstream and those delivering services to disabled people and black and minority ethnic groups), are supported to ensure they deliver a service to all sectors of society.
- Work is done with funding bodies to encourage the development of sustainable advice and information services.