



WRC Case Study: Partnerships

**Interview with Women's Services Strategic Network (WSSN) -
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About WSSN

Women's Services Strategic Network is a partnership of four women's organisations working in Brighton and Hove. Currently, the partners are:

- Brighton Women's Centre: provides personal development courses, holistic therapies, counselling, open-access drop-in, volunteer opportunities, pre-school for children aged 2-5 years
- Rise (Refuge, Information, Support and Education): provides advice, advocacy and support for survivors of domestic violence, including refuge accommodation, Helpline, IDVA service, Community outreach and Therapeutic Services, Children and Young People's service, crèche, training and consultancy
- Survivors Network provides: provides advice, advocacy and support for survivors of sexual violence and abuse
- Brighton Oasis Project: works with women affected by substance misuse and their families. It is commissioned to provide the psycho social aspects of drug treatment. It also provides services for sex workers. A crèche is provided for the children of women attending the project alongside therapeutic services for children and young people affected by substance misuse.

The aim of the Network is to enable a strong and cohesive women's sector to provide continuity of care and representation for women in Brighton and Hove.

How did they get here?

It all started with a conversation during the Women's Resource Centre AGM in 2007! The Director of Rise, the Director and a trustee of Brighton Women's Centre began talking about setting up a network to bring together organisations and individuals who were committed to maintaining and developing services for women in Brighton and Hove. Originally the network involved people from the Council as well as those from the voluntary sector: the Equalities Co-ordinator, Sexual Violence Co-ordinator and the DV Forum Chair. Members of the network met to share information, resources and good practice, to identify local women's

needs and avoid duplication of services. One of the first pieces of work the Network did was an analysis of the gaps in services for women in the local area.

In 2009 the voluntary sector members of the Network (Brighton Women's Centre, Rise, Brighton Oasis Project, Survivors Network and Threshold Women's Project) decided they needed to clarify the purpose of the partnership without Council staff being present in the discussion. Although this was initially a temporary measure, the group decided they wanted to continue to be a partnership of women's voluntary sector organisations. A separate cross-sector network, the Women's Strategy Group, was set up which continues to involve members from both voluntary and statutory sectors.

Originally the WSSN partnership involved an additional partner, Threshold Women's Mental Health Initiative Project (which provides counselling for women with mental health problems). Threshold (BHT) decided to step down from the Network a year ago. As they are a women's service within a larger generic organisation (Brighton Housing Trust) and not a women's organisation, they felt it was no longer appropriate for them to continue as a partner in WSSN. However, they continue to be involved in the Women's Strategy Group.

First partnership project

In 2009, WSSN put in a bid to the Ministry of Justice to run a project providing a range of services for women who have offended or those who are at risk of offending. The aim of the project is to reduce women's offending or re-offending by taking a holistic women-centred approach. They successfully secured funding and began the Inspire Project in March 2010. Each of the partner organisations (plus Threshold BHT) provides specialist services as part of a 'one-stop-shop' project.

For more information about the Inspire Project:

http://www.womenscentre.org.uk/index.php?What_We_Do:Inspire_Project

Successes and keys to success

Everyone agreed that a key to their success is a shared vision and strong commitment to women-only services in the city. They are all very clear about how these services make a difference to women's lives; they recognise that the issues women face are interlinked and that in order to meet their complex needs, a holistic approach is essential. The partners are able to work together yet respect each other's specialisms.

Applying for, securing funding and developing the Inspire Project has been a major success. WSSN was clear from the beginning that the project required the specialisms of all the partners (and Threshold BHT) in order to deliver an effective high-quality service. As far as they know, the Inspire Project is unique as a service for women ex-offenders and those at risk of offending delivered by a partnership of women-only organisations. The project also relies on close relationships with

the statutory sector, particularly the probation service, and good systems for referral to other generic services, such as housing.

WSSN is more widely known in the local area because of delivering the Inspire Project, both by the voluntary sector and by local authority commissioners who see the project and partnership as a model of good practice. They are aware that other local partnerships are facing big challenges which puts additional pressure on WSSN to ensure that their partnership, and the Inspire Project in particular, succeeds.

An important result of the partnership is a significant increase in joint work. This is a big change: for example, in the past, Rise and BOP did not work together at all, despite being two doors away from each other. Now all four organisations are aware of the details of each other's services, they discuss shared issues and working practices at both management and service delivery levels. They are now sharing resources such as space, staff, training and policies e.g. RISE is providing training for the Survivors' Network and BWC and RISE are delivering a support group together. Ultimately, this joint work results in an improved service for all the partners' beneficiaries.

Due to a commitment to collaborative working by all the partners, and by taking time to talk in depth about substantial, and sometimes difficult, issues, WSSN has developed deeper levels of trust and a *genuine* partnership.

The partnership benefited from the input of an external facilitator at two different stages in their development. Quite early on in the development of Inspire, a facilitator (provided by a local infrastructure organisation) ran two trust building workshops with the group, and also helped them to draw up a partnership agreement.

At a later stage, one of the partners secured funding from the Modernisation Fund, which enabled WSSN to employ a facilitator to look at different models for formal consortia, mergers etc. Although this was useful, they felt there were still too many unanswered questions about dealing with conflicts of interests, maintaining partners' individual identities, clarifying the specific benefits of being part of more formally constituted body. For the moment, they have decided not to pursue these more formal options.

Challenges and lessons learnt

WSSN got funding for the Inspire Project when it was still developing as a partnership. This forced them to "get their act together" but involved quite a steep learning curve.

Each of the partner organisations is understandably concerned about their own organisation's survival. This can lead to tensions between the interests and identities of individual partner organisations and those of the partnership but all the partners realise they are stronger together. They are also aware that lots of people are waiting for them to fail, and sometimes it is "sheer bloody-mindedness" that keeps the partnership going.

Establishing trust and dealing with differences of policy and practice is challenging and it can take a long time to reach consensus decisions. For example, WSSN had to reach a consensus on policies for the Inspire Project re: confidentiality and service provision for women under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

There have been specific challenges for the lead agency in the Inspire Project, Brighton Women's Centre. Mainly, these involve the tension between needing to make decisions quickly and ensuring all the partners are involved in decisions.

A formal partnership agreement is essential. In retrospect, it would also be helpful to have service level agreements between the lead agency and each of the partners when delivering a joint project. These would formally set out the details of each partner's responsibilities for project delivery.

Setting up and working in partnership has taken up a lot of staff time, particularly in the early stages of setting up the Inspire Project. At times, this felt quite overwhelming. Now that the project is up and running, less time is required, but partnership working still constitutes a significant portion of time for key staff on a weekly basis.

Although the partner organisations are different sizes and ages, they are all well-established women's organisations that have experience of working strategically in the local area. In addition, all the members of the group are senior staff in their organisations. They believe that both these factors may contribute to the relative cohesiveness of the partnership.

However, an ongoing issue for discussion is future membership of the partnership. For example, they are very aware that the partnership does not currently include any local black minority ethnic and/or refugee women's organisations. They have also had some discussions about the implications of opening up the partnership to women's organisations who do not share their feminist philosophy (e.g. the Women's Institute) or smaller grassroots organisations with less experience of working strategically. So, despite being in existence for four years, WSSN is still discussing its criteria for membership and possible limits to the number of partners (there is a concern that too many partners could make the partnership less effective and more difficult to manage).

Must-dos for successful partnerships

- Do not underestimate the time it takes to develop the trust necessary for a strong partnership
- Even if partner organisations come from different perspectives, ensure you are all clear about your shared goals
- It is essential to have a clear and shared understanding of what a partnership is
- Each partner must consider the pros and cons of being involved in the partnership for their own organisation
- Have clear terms of reference for the partnership and a formal partnership agreement for any partnership projects
- External support is essential

- All the partners must have resources available to devote to the partnership e.g. staff time, admin support, etc.
- Partnership working requires a lot of communication!
- If problems arise, don't wait until the next meeting to discuss them, talk about them right away and make sure the partnership commits enough time to resolving difficulties.
- Be clear about decision-making powers when delivering a joint project
- The management committees/boards of each of the partner organisations must be well-informed and share the commitment of managers/staff to the partnership
- You must have genuine shared commitment to the partnership: "You've got to be tough to stick in there."
- Just because we're women's organisations, do not assume there will be no differences of power. It is very important to address these.

Future plans

Over the past two years, WSSN has been primarily focussed on developing and delivering the Inspire Project. They are very clear that the partnership itself is still in the process of developing and there is now a need for WSSN to review its progress, agree its future strategy and write a business plan. As one of the members said: "We deliver fantastic services, but don't necessarily have the 'glossy spin' as a partnership; we probably need this now."

The Inspire Project has been very successful at achieving its outcomes and as a result, WSSN recently secured funding to continue the Project for another year. They have also received some money from the local authority to develop a women's strategy for Brighton and Hove, based on an analysis of the needs of women in the city. They hope this will provide a strong business case for the partnership, the need for women-only services in general and the Inspire Project in particular.