

CASE STUDY

CATALYSING CONSORTIA: Consortia Action Team supporting social enterprises

The Catalysing Consortia project

Being able to access procurement and tender opportunities is essential for social enterprises if they are to compete in the open market. But as social enterprises are typically smaller than privately owned companies, it can be difficult to compete. As a result of this situation, a study was carried out in the North West which identified that developing consortia was a key strategy that enabled social enterprises to access procurement and tender opportunities.

In partnership with Social Enterprise North West, Social Enterprise Lancashire Network (Selnet) commissioned two pieces of research in response to the lack of front-line consortia support from or for social enterprise organisations. The research, completed in May/June 2009, looked into the factors required for social enterprise consortia cohesion and successful tendering, as well as insights into social enterprise collaboration to deliver public services in the North West Region. The aim of Catalysing Consortia was to support social enterprises in the region to form consortia, so this research was vital to chart out the baseline knowledge essential to measuring the success of the project. The research led to the development of the Consortia Action Team (CAT), who identified potential consortia partnerships. The project then supported these consortia to bid and win delivery contracts, and connect through an online network.

The Consortia Action Team

In September 2009, five experts were recruited from the North West, with a range of experience and skills in legal advice, environment, generic social enterprise expertise, marketing and communications, and procurement. The aim of the Consortia Action Team (CAT) was to meet with social enterprises in order to find potential consortia and partnership working opportunities, and identify a lead champion in those groups. The milestone set by Capacitybuilders was to develop one consortium in each North West sub-region, including one with a specific environmental focus in lessening carbon footprints.

The CAT met quarterly to discuss their various projects, share knowledge, and report back against their milestone objectives. Over the course of the project, the CAT worked with 19 consortia, made up of many more individual social enterprises. As well as sharing their individual skill sets, the CAT advisors were able to draw on their colleagues' knowledge, to ensure consortia received the most comprehensive support possible. The final evaluation is yet to be compiled, but official figures of the number of social enterprises involved, as well as the number of public sector bids and contracts won, will be available by the end of the quarter in March 2011.

The Catalysing Consortia project has also supported consortia in the North West through an online network - www.opportunities-northwest.org. The

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

- Development of 19 North West social enterprise consortia
- The Opportunities North West website and online resources, with a particular focus on consortia working
- Consortia Action Team working to identify potential consortia in the region, and work together to refer and support groups
- Increased awareness of consortia working in the region, and creation of resources and systems which are replicable across the UK

website helps social enterprises to find potential consortia partners through a directory search tool, assist consortia in finding tenders, hosts a number of resources and research papers tailored at consortia, and allows users to tap into the expertise of the Advisory Team themselves. This website and its resources will remain as the legacy of the project, and is a valuable tool in the North West, as well as providing applicable learning for other regions.

KEY CHALLENGES

- The project lasted only 12 months, and it is a slow process to build trust and solid partnerships
- Difficult to infiltrate sub-regions, especially in rural areas with access issues, or fewer social enterprises
- Challenging for small social enterprises to commit time away from daily business to consortia working and the details of common agreements

Challenges and insights in developing consortia

Like any development tool or process, the consortia model involves a number of challenges, but the work of the CAT in strengthening consortia provides key insights into overcoming obstacles.

The CAT encountered problems infiltrating the sub-regions, finding it difficult to get social enterprises in rural areas involved, especially in areas with transport or access issues. In Cumbria, the team got a local partner on board, increasing awareness of the consortia work, and strengthening local area knowledge.

The Catalysing Consortia project ran for 12 months. In this time, social enterprises were to be engaged, and consortia partnerships formed and developed to the point of tender-readiness. The long term concept of consortia was new to many of the social enterprises involved, and it takes time to develop trust and understanding between partners with differing views, methods, or values. The partnerships formed as a result of the project will continue however, and some of the team will continue to work alongside and assist the consortia formed.

Small social enterprises often have low staff numbers, or may be championed only by a single person. Making time to attend consortia meetings and devote resources to common agreements alongside the day to day running of a business can be difficult for already overstretched social enterprises. However, the benefits of consortia working; the partnership support, expert personalised advice from the CAT, and increased capacity for successful tendering is worth the investment by small enterprises.

The closing of the project

The Catalysing Consortia project finished in November 2010, with Selnet hosting a workshop at Social Enterprise North West's Trade Show in Liverpool. The workshop "Opening Doors" was an opportunity for commissioners drawn from the health, social care and housing sectors, and local authorities across the five sub regions to exchange views with local social enterprise leaders. The conversation involved questions about the expectations of commissioners in tendering and social enterprises in responding, seeking to increase understanding between the two parties. The workshop brought to a close the Catalysing Consortia project and will feed into the Capacitybuilders National Knowledge exchange programme. The workshop information will shortly be available on the Selnet website.

KEY INSIGHTS

- Consortia need time to develop, for common understanding and trusting relationships to form and strengthen between partners
- Working in partnership with local support bodies provides access to social enterprises in the area and promotes the work of consortia
- A group of experts can offer a variety of skills and knowledge to support consortia, rather than a single advisor with a particular focus

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