

Lessons From a Partnership of 'Large Help Small'

The first two years of the
Strategic Network for Mental Health



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Executive Summary

In 2002 four voluntary sector providers of mental health services created a partnership under the banner Strategic Network for Mental Health ('the network'). In 2004, the Home Office funded an independent evaluation of the network under the Exemplar Fund programme. The aim of this evaluation is to assess the progress of the network two years after it began.

"The network is a place for thinking." Senior Manager

The Strategic Network for Mental Health is an informal but semi-structured partnership of one large (Advance) and three smaller mental health and housing voluntary organisations with five objectives:

- sharing knowledge and expertise
- providing services to one another
- jointly providing services to others
- influencing public opinion and informing government policy
- and by so doing, minimising duplication of effort and reducing costs.

Members are bound together by a Memorandum of Understanding which commits them:

- to work together in the interests of efficiency, good practice and improvements to services;
- to share costs of such things as training, quality assurance and policy development;
- to sell services to one another 'at cost'.

The cost of the network is minimal as it has no dedicated worker.

All partners report that the network has been a resounding success - even though the five objectives of the partnership have not been equally realised. All the indications suggest that, in time, they will be achieved.

From our research we conclude that:

- The partnership model presented by the network is an efficient way for medium sized charities and community organisations to grow their capacities in a relatively short period of time.
- This is not a 'quick fix'. This is not easy to do. Careful preparation and tenacity, over a period of years, is required.
- Essential ingredients for the 'correct fit' of partners are that they hold similar values, serve the same or similar client groups and function in discrete territories. We found that the differences that remain between the members (large and small) are valuable to the group as a whole.
- The partnership was heavily dependent on an experienced champion to persevere and carry through the project against all obstacles and to lead the team.

- The greatest benefits of the partnership are sharing knowledge and expertise, minimising duplication of effort and reducing costs, and providing services to one another - in that order.
- Further, the partnership brought advantages at three levels: providing personal support to staff (particularly the Chief Executives), as a support to the organisation as a whole and as a vehicle for bettering services to people with mental health problems.
- There are a number of ways of moving the *network* forward – adding members to the partnership, appointing a dedicated worker, involving the Board more, and improving upward and downward communication within and across organisations. Each step has a dilemma (or dilemmas) associated with it, which the *network* will have to consider.

"All partners report the *network* has been a resounding success" *Compass Partnership*

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1 Introduction

The Strategic Network for Mental Health (SNMH) is a partnership of four voluntary sector mental health service providers, all committed to the provision of services designed to meet the needs of people who have been disadvantaged as a result of mental ill-health. Ideals of empowerment, promotion of independence, respect, choice, recovery and a commitment to equality of opportunity, underpin their services.

Set up in 2002, the *network* was created to test the benefits of a significant national provider of services (Advance Housing and Support, based in Witney, Oxfordshire) forming a partnership with three smaller, regional providers who wished to remain independent - Second Step in Bristol, Mind in Birmingham, and Sussex Oakleaf (SOHA) in Haywards Heath, West Sussex.

The purpose of this report is to describe the *network*, assess whether the intended benefits of the partnership have been achieved and to draw out key lessons for the future.

Information for this research came from materials produced during the first two years of the partnership that documented their activities and from the opinions of members of the *network*.

Twenty six people, working at all levels of the four organisations, participated in face to face or telephone interviews - including all four Chairs. Participants were asked the extent to which their expectations of the partnership had been met by giving 'marks out of ten' for the achievement of the partnership's five objectives. They also discussed how the partnership could be improved and gave their advice to any would-be partnership makers.

We would like to thank everyone who gave so generously of their time to talk to us. Their openness and willingness to share their experiences made this research possible.

2 The context

Rarely has the health and social care sector in the UK witnessed as much upheaval in policy and practice as in the last few years. The demands on voluntary sector providers are now complex, exposing and never ending. Voluntary organisations are increasingly delivering public services on behalf of Health, Housing and Social Services Departments. There is a strong desire in central government to expand the capacity of the sector so it can deliver more services at higher quality.

Capacity building and strengthening the infrastructure of voluntary and community organisations has therefore become a central concern of the Home Office Active Communities Unit. Its consultation on Voluntary and Community Infrastructure in 2003 suggested that partnership between large and small organisations could be a solution to building capacity and managing - even resisting - the highly competitive funding climate of today (Home Office, 2003). Subsequently, the Home Office infrastructure strategy document 'ChangeUp' recommended:

- 'peer support including experienced managers assisting less experienced managers
- 'twinning relationships between organisations to enable the sharing of information and best practice' (Home Office, 2004).

NCVO also reports that large national organisations are employing a variety of methods to work with smaller ones (unpublished survey of Chief Executives, February, 2004) and the National Institute for Mental Health in England (NIMHE) is recognising the potential advantages of the 'big supporting small' agenda in the voluntary mental health sector.

The UK is not alone in considering 'little and large' partnerships as a way of building organisation capacity. There is also growing partnership activity in the USA with 24% of that sector reporting experience of strategic alliances (Hudson, 2003).

3 The concept of the partnership

In 1999, the Chief Executive of Advance Housing and Support approached CVS (management) Consultants with the request that they advise on partnership and collaborative working. Advance specialises in the fields of learning disability and mental health, although at the time enjoyed a higher reputation as a provider of services to people with learning disabilities. A primary motive for setting up the partnership, therefore, was to enhance Advance's reputation within the mental health sector. As a consequence, during 2000, prospective partners were contacted whose values were similar to those of Advance and whose geographical areas of activity were close enough for practical purposes, but did not give rise to any direct competition or conflict of interest. Advance suggested that they should all create a strategic partnership and the advantages for all parties were carefully listed.

Not all went smoothly. It was originally planned to include five partners but only four organisations were found. Moreover, the trustees of one of the partners initially turned down the approach. In total, it took three

History of the network

1999	Idea of partnership conceived
2000	Seeking partners – using the services of 'match maker'
2001	Persuading the Boards to agree
2002	Launch of Strategic Network for Mental Health at House of Lords

years of careful work to set up the partnership.

Eventually, a collaborative arrangement was agreed and a Memorandum of Understanding, listing the

The objectives of the network

Network partners believe the opportunities and threats presented by the current mental health agenda can best be addressed by working collaboratively. The objectives of the Strategic Network for Mental Health are:

- sharing knowledge and expertise
- providing services to one another
- jointly providing services to others
- influencing public opinion and informing government policy
- and by so doing, minimising duplication of effort and reducing costs.

objects and commitments to the partnership was signed.

The growing interest in partnerships to help voluntary sector organisations better achieve their mission has resulted in several levels and models of collaboration.

The network stands for	The network is not
<p>Collaborative working within a structure, sealed by a memorandum of understanding, which commits members:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ to work together in the interests of efficiency, good practice and improvements to services; ■ to share costs of such things as training, quality assurance and policy development; ■ to sell services to one another 'at cost'. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ an informal 'chat shop' ■ a take over ■ a merger.

Where the network sits on a continuum between very formal and very informal partnerships	
<p>Informal networks</p> <p style="text-align: center;">← SNMH</p> <p>low level of commitment</p> <p>small loss of autonomy</p> <p>no loss of independence</p> <p>informal networking</p>	<p>Long term strategic formal alliances</p> <p style="text-align: center;">→</p> <p>high engagement</p> <p>greater integration</p> <p>considerable loss of independence</p> <p>business based</p> <p>legal framework</p>

"Other structures are based on hard economic realities - looking at the best use of joint assets, seeking aggressively to grow and expand - in other words based on a business ethic. The culture of the network is looser, more supportive and more informal, based on similar values." *CEO*

4 The partners

network partners each provide a different range of services designed around the individual needs of people who have been disadvantaged due to mental ill health. All four are charitable and governed by an unpaid board of trustees. All four are 'social businesses' with a substantial proportion of their income generated by selling services to Social Services Departments, Housing Departments, Primary Care Trusts or other voluntary and community organisations.

- **Advance Housing and Support Limited** was established in 1974. It is a specialist provider of housing and support services designed to meet the individual needs of people with a learning disability or mental health problem. It operates throughout central and southern England - with a concentration of services in Oxfordshire and the East Midlands. The organisation's headquarters are in Witney, Oxfordshire. Other offices are located throughout central and southern England.
- **Sussex Oakleaf Housing Association (SOHA)**, was established in 1994 and provides a range of services for people with mental health needs, substance misuse problems and homeless young people / families. SOHA provides high support residential care, supported housing, outreach and day services throughout West Sussex.
- **Second Step Housing Association Limited** serves Bristol, South Gloucester and North Somerset. It was founded in 1986 to provide supported housing for people with acute and long term mental health support needs. It now offers a range of services including a rough sleepers initiative, mentoring programmes and a training, recreation and employment project to help users find meaningful occupation.
- **Mind in Birmingham** is a mental health charity and an affiliated member of National Mind - known as the leading mental health charity in England and Wales. It serves the conurbation of Birmingham with a wide range of mental health services including: residential care homes, a nursing home for older adults, day/evening services and 'Drop Ins', community based women's services, supported tenancies and community-based 'floating support'.

All members of the network promote the Recovery Approach to individual support and are committed to user involvement.

Comparative sizes of the network partners - 2002 and 2004

	Advance		Second Step		Sussex Oakleaf		Mind in Birmingham	
	2002	2004	2002	2004	2002	2004	2002	2004
Turnover - at time of joining the network and two years later	£14m	£19m	£1.3m	£4.4m	£2m	£3m	£3.5m	£4.3m
Number of staff (fte)	400	500	40	130	60	100	150	160
Approximate number of clients	1000	1200	< 200	400	150	200	500	600
Approximate number of projects / schemes running	45 *	52	3 services 19 bases	6 services 23 bases	13	20	34	37

* This represents the number of service groups managed by a Service Manager. The total number of individual services is considerably higher than this.

The growth in all the organisations is partly attributable to adapting to pressures from the government's Supporting People programme.

“In the beginning I thought this was a good idea - but at the wrong time - because we were too busy. Now I see that the partnership has saved us time - because of the quality of the relationships we've made, we've been able to forge ahead much more confidently and that's saved us time.” *Senior manager*

Whilst membership of the network was said to have made this growth much easier, it is not possible to say that the growth was a function of, or attributable per se, to the partnership.

5 The activities

"It's a non-competitive environment and not 'local'. I have to be careful in other environments - but we're not competing and therefore we can talk openly because there's no threat... just a commitment to share results." *CEO*

There are three levels of contact between the organisations:

- high level, quarterly meetings between the CEOs to exchange information on areas of mutual interest. These meetings are designed to enable each organisation to develop a more in-depth understanding of issues by drawing on a bigger pool of expertise and geographical coverage. They are hosted by Advance - which also provides 'secretariat' services to the partnership. The four Chairs are invited to join the meetings once a year. The CEOs contact each other freely between times
- meetings at Senior Management level on HR, finance, training, quality, setting policies etc - also largely using Advance's hospitality - after which senior staff may link up for special joint work
- conferences, good practice and shared learning and training days - involving staff at all levels and some users - jointly funded by the partners - after which staff at service level are no longer in touch.

The group benefits from the involvement of Advance's CEO in national fora, such as the Mental Health Providers Forum (MHPF), the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations (ACEVO) and the National Institute for Mental Health in England (NIMHE).

network activities between 2002 and 2004

Objective One: to share knowledge and expertise

Supporting people. Joint events held on the Quality Assessment Framework and Value for Money. Regular meetings of quality assurance staff from all four organisations.

National Care Standards Commission / CSCI. Preparing for the new registration and regulatory regime for care services.

Recovery in mental health. A steering group with representation from all four organisations has been developing an action research proposal. Training of senior staff and individuals from the pilot services undertaken.

Two Good Practice Events - with over 60 participants. These events provided an opportunity for information sharing on a wide variety of topics including user involvement, alternative therapies, social inclusion, culturally sensitive services and home ownership.

Joint training - including a two-day event for senior managers on investigation of serious complaints and adult abuse, personal safety training and management development training. All Advance courses open to network partners.

Objective Two: to provide services to one another

Advance has provided an **HR service** to MIND in Birmingham - that covers employment policies, procedures and expert advice - and various short term HR and financial services to other partner organisations. For example, Advance assisted in a review of financial services for Second Step.

Objective Three: to jointly provide services to others

Advance's support services in Sussex were transferred to Sussex Oakleaf and are now provided jointly under the terms of a management agreement.

Some owners of Advance's Shared Ownership properties receive a support service from *network* partners.

Proposals have been developed which are intended to lead to the joint provision of services to women with a history of self-harm in Birmingham.

The MIND in Birmingham Employment Officer has been seconded to Work in Progress, Advance's jointly owned subsidiary operating in the supported employment field.

A proposal to undertake research and development into the capacity of the voluntary sector to provide Assertive Outreach Services has been developed.

Objective Four: to influence public opinions and inform government policy

network members worked with Starfish Consultancy on behalf of ODPM in preparing guidelines on user involvement and Supporting People.

Second Step contributed to the NIMHE report on Clinical Governance in the Voluntary Sector through their association with Advance and the MHPF.

The Recovery Action research is intended to have an influence on policy and opinions.

The SNMH model itself has become an area of interest to government and others in the voluntary sector.

A joint exhibition stand was taken to the inaugural 'Mental Health Today' exhibition in 2003, and to regional NIMHE conferences in 2004.

A SNMH leaflet has been produced.

Objective Five: to minimise duplication of effort and reduce costs

The joint training and delivery of services by Advance to *network* partners have all been designed to minimise duplication of effort and maximise efficiency as well as share information and expertise. Costs have been shared and services provided to one another have been provided at cost (i.e. full contribution to overheads but no profit margin).

6 The successes

Assessment of the achievement of objectives of the partnership formed the central point of this project. All those who took part in this inquiry were asked to give marks out of ten to the extent to which they perceived the objectives of the partnership had been achieved.

Marks out of ten for the achievement of the network's objectives		
Objective 1	To share knowledge and expertise	8
Objective 2	To provide services to one another	7 to 8
Objective 3	To jointly provide services to others	-
Objective 4	To influence public opinions and inform government policy	-
Objective 5	To minimise duplication of effort and reduce costs	8

6.1 Success in achieving the partnership's objectives

Objective One: to share knowledge and expertise

(extent to which the partnership was felt to have achieved this objective = 8/10)

"It's a forum for ideas." Senior manager

To say that most respondents were ecstatic about the benefits of the partnership in terms of the sharing of knowledge and expertise would not be an overstatement. This has been the most successful outcome of the partnership. Although some Advance staff had been anxious about the benefits to Advance, they now recognise that there has been significant two way learning.

However, staff at service level in the different organisations have not tended to remain in contact after conferences and training days – so the 'sharing of ideas' was not always continued.

For details of what has taken place, please see the full chart in the previous section. Interestingly, there is some frustration from staff that some service level policies are still being developed by each organisation independently. Quality issues have been jointly discussed and acted upon - particularly with regard to Supporting People. Joint work on IT is at an early stage of development.

Objective Two: to provide services to one another

(extent to which the partnership was felt to have achieved this objective = 7 to 8/10)

"It's sometimes difficult to get the environment right so that large can learn from small- but we seem to have got that right." Senior manager

Unlike the free and mutual exchange of expertise and ideas, providing services to one another was a strictly one-way process - with Advance providing services to the other partners. Early anxiety by Advance staff about their capacity to offer services soon disappeared. Advance now 'sells' HR services at cost and gives advice and guidance on finance and fundraising. The advantage for the smaller organisations is that they are getting consultancy from a source that knows their culture and that they can trust.

"We've done well here." CEO of one of the smaller organisations

Some limited internal auditing work by one of the 'small' partners, for another, has taken place.

Extent to which expectations were met regarding providing services to one another	Score out of ten
Discussions about 'quality issues'	7 - 8
HR Consultancy	7 - 8
Finance	7 - 8
Fundraising	7 - 8
IT	2

Scores for the extent to which their hopes and expectations about providing services to one another were met, hover around 7 to 8 out of 10. Similar scores are given for the joint discussions about 'quality issues'. Initiatives in IT received only scores of around 2 out of 10.

"We've not been able to get this (joint IT initiatives) off the ground - so I'm going to score this 2 out of 10 - but in terms of willingness - I'll give it a score of 8 out of 10." Manager

Objective Three: to jointly provide services to others

Jointly providing services to others is an underdeveloped area of endeavour, and it was a surprise, to some, that this was an objective of the partnership. For this reason, no scores out of ten are given. Various reasons for this were proposed – the main one being that the government's Supporting People initiative so absorbed partnership members that all notions of jointly providing services to others were swept away.

However, SOHA is providing services for residents in two houses owned by Advance in Sussex, and Mind in Birmingham and Advance have collaborated in a modest but highly successful way on a 'Shared Ownership' scheme in Birmingham. For other information, please see the full chart in the previous section.

Objective Four: to influence public opinions and inform government policy

"It's something that will come with time." CEO

There have been some limited successes in achieving this objective:

- The partnership's joint work comparing and sharing local experience of the Supporting People initiative made it possible to influence and help standardise national 'requirements' for the Supporting People Framework.
- The partnership's joint work on Recovery concepts and joint participation in research on Recovery - an initiative promoted and led by one of the smaller partners - is expected to have major implications for how commissioners of health services will view mental health service delivery in the future.
- The partnership has promoted itself in various ways (for example through its launch at the House of Lords and at national conferences) and the model is attracting some attention in the ODPM, the Mental Health Providers Forum and in other arenas.

This is another objective that has not yet achieved its potential - though it is definitely an emerging benefit, or function, of the partnership structure. (For details of what has taken place, please see the full chart in the previous section.) Only Advance has a 'public affairs' department, so expectations here were restricted. Perhaps for this reason, it is another objective not widely known by staff at lower levels within the organisations. For this reason, no scores out of ten are given.

Objective Five: to minimise duplication of effort and reduce costs

(extent to which the partnership was felt to have achieved this objective = 8/10)

"It works because we're retaining our individuality. We've shared expertise and we don't keep on re-inventing the wheel. We've done major pieces of work which alone we couldn't have completed particularly in Supporting People it (the partnership) enabled us to be a major player. Together it works - individually it might not have been possible." *Resettlement team leader*

The main joint work that minimised duplication of effort, and therefore reduced costs, was on 'quality' standards. (This is laid out in the chart in the previous section.). These standards largely impacted on the voluntary and community sector after the conception of the partnership. Opportunities for sharing experiences, training and ideas, immediately presented themselves and this was thought to have reduced costs.

"The difficulty is that all organisations are ground down by meeting funders' requirements, we're not looking hard enough at how to reduce costs. But we can do that with the network." *senior manager*

6.2 The benefits of the Partnership

All 26 interviewees were asked to describe what to them had been the greatest advantages of the partnership.

"It's changed the outlook of the organisation - it's made us more outward looking." *Manager*

Their responses divided evenly between: advantages or benefits on an individual level - as personal support for workers holding down very difficult and stressful jobs; advantages for the organisation - which was thus able to function better - even at 'higher' levels; and the sense that the partnership was a facility for growing, or creating, better services for mental health sufferers.

"The network has encouraged us to find time to reflect." *Manager*

People at all levels - from the Chairs to service level workers - realised that the partnership meant different things to different people within the organisations, but all of them realised that the people gaining the most out of the partnership were the CEOs - followed by those at very senior management levels.

Whilst it was recognised that there has so far been limited direct gain from the partnership for users, the spin off for them was that happy workers, enthused and working at the cutting edge, are likely to provide better services. Innovative and challenging ideas about using clients to help assess the quality of services were being discussed and seemed to be possible largely because of staff confidence derived from the partnership.

6.3 The costs

"Yes it has cost us - but nothing over which we have had no control. The huge benefit is that it doesn't cost." *CEO*

No one could say how much the partnership had cost their organisation. Indeed, the partnership's success was partly attributed to its low cost - a central issue for the Boards of the smaller organisations.

The only cost for the smaller organisations is travel to and from meetings and time away from the job. Conferences and other events are jointly paid for. Even costs for Advance were reported as minimal.

"It's been the antithesis of 'let's look at costs'. It's a creative thing - sharing ideas. And we've found the time and space to do it." *Senior Manager*

No one reported spending very much of their time on the partnership - the average commitment was estimated to be approximately 5% of the working year - across all levels of management and lower.

6.4 Key benefits for the smaller organisations

"The meetings are wonderful! There are people there who you can really pick up ideas from." *Senior Manager*

The key benefits of the network for the three smaller organisations as reported by interviewees

- It has a loose structure and gentle culture.
- It is an efficient way of building organisational capacity.
- It provides similar advantages to a merger with none of the disadvantages.
- There is freedom to develop according to local circumstances.
- It is a peer support group for the CEOs, carrying with it with some right to make demands on each other and resulting in increased confidence.
- Managers at all levels are able to support each other and solve each other's problems on a wide range of issues - resulting in a significant skills transfer and the capacity to grow more successfully.
- It has created relationships that could provide a platform for closer collaboration in the future - should that ever be wanted or necessary.
- It has taught all parties collaboration techniques - and these are skills much coveted by others.
- There is a sense that the critical mass created by the four organisations together gives reassurance to funders and commissioners.
- It is inexpensive - with no recorded costs - and absorbs relatively little time.

6.5 Key benefits for the large organisation

"We never thought it could be such fun - that it would feel so good." *CEO*

In addition to profiting from many of the benefits listed above, there are added advantages of the partnership for the larger organisation.

Additional benefits for the large organisation:

- Its reputation within the mental health sector was enhanced.
- Its reputation for innovation was enhanced.
- It shared in an open arena of new ideas in which originality was certainly not limited to itself.
- It achieved many of the benefits of a merger without any of the headaches or the cost. For example it has received fee income for the provision of central services; the costs of training, research and development have been shared.

6.6 The critical ingredients of successful 'large: small' partnerships

The critical ingredients of successful partnerships like this, assessed by those involved, are ranked below in order of importance:

- openness
- not being in competition with each other
- being prepared to reciprocate, share, collaborate
- honest, respectful, relationships between the CEOs (which filters through to all the staff)
- having a common purpose
- holding similar values
- having a leader.

Many interviewees reported that the visionary leadership of Advance's Chief Executive was an essential element of the success of the Partnership. The CEOs of the three smaller organisations expected that leadership should come from Advance's CEO and they felt that he played the role exceptionally well. Two of the three CEOs of the smaller organisations felt that too much democracy would have resulted in a far less effective partnership. For specific projects, leadership was accepted from one of the smaller organisations.

7 The problems

It is clear that it took an immense amount of time and effort to establish the partnership. In the early days, opposition to the partnership came from a number of sources.

Advance's CEO had to persevere against the feelings of some colleagues who saw the partnership as a potential distraction, a waste of money, poor use of their time and certainly not good use of the CEOs time. They questioned the notion that the bigger organisation should give resources to the smaller ones - particularly when they felt stretched themselves.

There were problems when the smaller organisations were approached by Advance. Ideas about the partnership were met with suspicion by **their Boards**.

"My Board were very wary at first because they thought there must be a hidden agenda and they were keen not to get into a development partnership with a single RSL." *CEO*

"My Board was initially very worried - the RSL field has witnessed lots of swallowing up of small organisations. When a 'matchmaker' arrived, this added to their suspicions ... when they realised it was sharing expertise etc they were much happier." *CEO*

Two years into the partnership these worries have disappeared, but they have been replaced by different concerns.

There has been **uneven achievement of the five objectives**. This may be merely a product of the project's short life-span, or of the government's initiatives in the field which so pre-occupied the partners, or of the limited time people are able to put in to the partnership.

Interviewees reported that there is **poor upward communication** about the partnership within all the organisations, resulting in less understanding of it by Chairs and Boards. Indeed, because the *network* is substantially management led, there is some danger that the Boards of Trustees are being left out. Real frustration was voiced by one Chair.

There is **poor downward communication** about the partnership within all the organisations, resulting in some staff frustrations and disappointments the further into the organisation one goes. Some middle managers and project workers are not aware of the partnership. As a result, there can be poor follow-through of ideas to all levels of staff. There has been considerable difficulty in maintaining the excitement and sense of impetus that had been achieved at meetings and conferences.

There is some evidence from Advance that they are going to have to address the **resource issue** because this is limiting what can be done and the strain necessarily falls on the larger partner.






8 The future

Since the mental health and housing sectors in UK are unlikely to remain static over the next five years, it is unlikely that a partnership such as this will remain the same in the future. It will have to be flexible enough to respond to change - not least to the pressure of government policies.

The *network* could easily stay in its present format until it has more evenly achieved its objectives - and indeed this was the feeling of a few staff. A range of alternatives present themselves as solutions to the problems currently faced:

- Continue present level of activity
- Extend the partnership to include more organisations.
- Deepen the relationships by:
 - Boards sharing experience and expertise in governance
 - Shadowing of staff at different levels of the organisations
 - Sharing 'back office' services.

However, each option presents dilemmas for the future of the partnership.

Logical next steps for the network		Dilemmas
<p>Expand</p> <p>in order to increase its range of expertise, in order to increase its critical mass, in order to increase its influence</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The addition of, say, two more organisations would add to the already onerous travelling since a pre-requisite of joining would have to be territory that doesn't overlap. ■ newcomers would have to break into very tight relationships. ■ if it gets too large, it may lose its intimacy, immediacy and flexibility ■ growth in numbers could put a strain on leadership.
<p>Appoint a dedicated worker</p> <p>in order to help move the work forward (for example, a jointly funded policy development officer)</p>		<p>The partnership is so attractive, in part, because it doesn't "cost anything". The appointment of a worker would</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) impose a charge on all the organisations b) change the character of the engagements
<p>Fulfill all the objectives of the partnership with vigour</p>		<p>Organic development allows for consolidation of what has been achieved. Too much activity might overwhelm the partnership.</p>
<p>Involve the Board</p>		<p>It has been difficult to get Chairs to the meetings to which they have been invited. Board involvement would be important to the future development of the collaboration.</p>
<p>Improve upward and downward communication</p>		<p>Mutual support groups could be set up horizontally across the organisation to facilitate people doing similar work liaising with their counterparts. This would result in more focused meetings. It already happens to a certain extent. Caution would need to be taken not to damage the special relationship of the CEOs. The main challenge to this is time, money and organisational capacity.</p>

9 Conclusions

1. The *network* has been a resounding success - even though the five objectives of the partnership have not been equally realised. All the indications suggest that, in time, they could be achieved.
2. The *network's* activities have been driven largely by external forces. The housing sector, and to a great extent the mental health sector, too, had to respond to the government's Supporting People Programme that came into force in April 2003. This external driver may have been an essential force that bound the group together.
3. A critical ingredient of the *network* is leadership. There is considerable dependence on the skills and charisma of Advance's CEO.
4. It was important to have taken a systematic approach to finding partners: ensuring that all of them were of similar size, with similar cultures, totally discrete territories, excellent reputations and specialising in different areas of work within their field. The differences that remain between the members (large and small) are valuable to the group as a whole.
5. There are no 'one-way' relationships. The *network* works because everyone gets something out of it. There is no competition between partners and therefore the CEOs can have trusting relationships.
6. Membership of the *network* has 'taught' all parties involved how to co-operate with other organisations. This is a skill much coveted by others.
7. There is a strong sense that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. The smaller organisations say that they undertook work, or did better quality work, as a direct result of the partnership.
8. The *network* has similar advantages to, but with none of the disadvantages of, a merger.
9. In the desire not to allow the *network* to have cost implications, restricted finances may be limiting the achievement of greater benefits.
10. Increasing the number of partners could increase the pool of experience but may aggravate the communication problems.
11. Keeping communication channels open - and in some instances enlarging them - across all levels of the organisations is a major challenge for the future.

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Compass Partnership

Compass Partnership is a management consultancy specialising in the management and governance of independent non-profit-seeking organisations. Founded in 1982, we have worked with over 600 not-for-profit clients and have built up a body of knowledge on management and governance in this field and a tried and tested range of approaches to consultancy. Our services include strategic planning, implementation support, management development, culture change, governance development and problems that cross the boundaries of management and governance.

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Our books

Managing Without Profit, Mike Hudson, (DSC, 2000) sets out the theory and practice of creating highly successful nonprofit organisations.

Managing at the Leading Edge, Mike Hudson, (DSC, 2003) describes what can be learned from the management and governance of nonprofit organisations in the USA.

Both are available from www.dsc.org.uk



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