

Engaging VCOs in Deprived Neighbourhoods Using the Inter-Link Capability Model (ILCM)

Andrew Climo

Abstract:

There is agreement that VCOs must be engaged in neighbourhood renewal programmes if these are to be effective. This case study demonstrates the successful use of the ILCM in order to achieve a cost-effective programme for VCO engagement, and measurably improving VCO capability. This is at a time when there is concern that capacity building programmes do not deliver substantial local benefit.

Background

Given the development of Government policy relating to neighbourhood renewal over the last decade, it would be fair to say that there is a broad consensus that effective Voluntary and Community Organisation (VCO) engagement is essential if neighbourhood regeneration is to be sustainable.¹

There is also general agreement that local people need to be involved in regeneration activities as effective and respected stakeholders. It follows that residents and activists within the community in question need to be:

- (1) **Enabled** so that they have an effective input into decision making,
- (2) **Linked** to the various delivery agencies,
- (3) **Involved** directly in renewal and regeneration activities in their neighbourhood.

For their part, public sector bodies need to work to establish successful and durable partnerships with VCOs that are involved at all levels within those neighbourhoods. This is in the interests of local government and other statutory organisations too, since partnering with a diverse range of VCOs is more likely to result in effective competition amongst service providers and resulting in end users' requirements being met.²

There are two other *critical success factors* that need to be taken into account with respect to the selection of potential VCO partners: (1) They must be engaged within the neighbourhood

¹ *A Commitment to Neighbourhood Renewal: National Strategy Action Plan*, SEU, 2001

² *Hearts and Minds: Commissioning from the Voluntary Sector*, Audit Commission, July 2007

or willing to make a long term commitment to it, and (2) local people should be active within the VCO and have influence over what it does and how.

However, this is often not the case: There are inhibitors both to community/voluntary organisations working within deprived neighbourhoods and to local people becoming involved in community and voluntary activities or being able to influence outcomes.

Moreover, there is considerable concern that the mechanisms are not yet in place to engage effectively VCOs in service delivery,³ notably that:

- Capacity building programmes have not tended to result in improvements at the local level,
- Smaller VCOs often feel that commissioning is not (as yet) a means of engagement with public bodies that they are ready for,
- Partnership working is typically *ad hoc* and largely relates to a public service delivery agenda, and
- Capacity building is not linked to commissioning: Commissioning is seen as a barrier to participation in service delivery rather than an enabler.

Problem Statement

- i. There may be insufficient engagement of VCOs in the deprived neighbourhood in question,
- ii. The VCOs involved may not be sufficiently competent or have sufficient mass to make a suitable contribution to neighbourhood priorities, and
- iii. Although VCOs may be present in a given neighbourhood, this is no guarantee that the VCO itself has engaged with residents or that residents are taking part in community renewal activities.

This case study examines the experiences of a recent pilot project using the *Inter-Link Capability Model* (ILCM), and shows that a coordinated programme within a deprived neighbourhood can increase the level of engagement of VCOs in terms of the number of VCOs, their level of competence and engagement and involvement with residents. **The results of this form of capability building are both measurable and profound.**

Project Definition

The project was specifically intended to contribute to the following *Quality of Life* Indicators:

- To benefit more deprived neighbourhoods and/or marginalised communities within a given area.
- To increase measurably community involvement or empowerment.

Specifically:

- To increase the capability of seven voluntary or community organisations (VCOs) operating in the Treneere area by elevating them by at least one level of the ILCM.
- To lead to at least seven new services being delivered by these VCOs to the community of Treneere.

³ *Ibid*

The Treneere neighbourhood was chosen since it is in the top 3% of deprived neighbourhood in England, and is the most deprived in Cornwall, itself an economically disadvantaged region in receipt of *Objective 1* funding. It is within the Penwith District of Cornwall, one of two districts in receipt of *Neighbourhood Renewal Funding* in Cornwall.

The Inter-Link Capability Model (ILCM) comprises five levels of competence, the lowest (entry level) being Level 1, and the highest being Level 5. VCOs progress from Level 1 to Level 5 (if they so wish) by means of *Health Checks*. These are ‘soft’ audits comprising formal, independent assessment and informal coaching / mentoring support more or less along the lines of ‘traditional’ community development work.

Funding

The project team applied for a *Neighbourhood Renewal Fund* small grant of £5,000. This was specifically:

- To pilot the ILCM within the deprived neighbourhood of Treneere,
- To provide intelligence to the *Neighbourhood Partnership* as to the readiness of voluntary and community groups in the area to support the delivery of the *Neighbourhood Strategy*,
- To identify complementary services provided by the VCO, and
- To identify which VCOs from those selected would be suitable for subsequent delivery of services.

Method of engagement

The pilot project brought together various aspects of regeneration, including the involvement of the *Local Strategic Partnership*, *Community Empowerment Network*, *Neighbourhood Partnership* and participating VCOs. Particular interest was also shown by the *Cornwall Children and Young People’s Partnership* who maintained a close watching brief throughout.

Participating organisations were supported throughout the process, which involved developing understanding of the benefits of the scheme, induction, preparation, assessment, coaching, development of capability, reassessment and finally recognition of achievement (*Accreditation*).

During the *preparation stage* the participating community groups and voluntary organisations were offered a number of different development strategies depending on whether they were primarily involved in *service delivery*, *community engagement* or *partnership working*.

It was decided that the focus of the pilot should be for organisations who deliver services to children and young people (CYP). These organisations should or could deliver services relating to this theme and based within the community of Treneere.

A small project team was formed working one day per week over a four month period, whose first task was to short list CYP-focused community and voluntary groups who would be prepared to work in the Treneere neighbourhood.

A launch event ‘*Mission Possible?*’ was then held with the aim of encouraging VCOs to take part in the programme, become informed about the Inter-Link Capability Model and sign up to the process.

47 different organisations were invited to attend the launch event (from an Inter-Link membership of 1,200 across the two NRF Districts of *Penwith* and *Kerrier*). 20 organisations attended and nine organisations signed up to work through the process.

Each organisation was asked to complete a simple application form which asked:

- which level of the ILCM they thought their organisation would achieve,
- what service they do or could deliver within Treneere relating to the CYP theme,
- how much time they could commit to the pilot,
- whether they would be willing to attend training,
- if they felt their organisations had any training needs, and
- what type of support they think they would require from the project team.

Application of the ILCM Health Check process

Once each group had completed their application form, a meeting was arranged between the organisation's representative(s) and an *Assessor* and *Facilitator* from within the project team.

The initial meeting (*the preparation meeting*) gave the participating organisation an opportunity to ask any additional questions. This meeting was also used to underline the goals of the pilot, ensure the VCO had a realistic view of the effort required from them and describe how they would be supported through the process.

During the preparation meeting the organisation was asked to sign a *Project Agreement* outlining what was expected of the group and what they should expect from the project team during the pilot. Next the Facilitator and Assessor took the group's *Representative* through the Health Check *preparation list*. This document lists the necessary evidence required from the VCO to support the Health Check process.

Each group's Representative was urged to use the time between the preparation meeting and the Health Check to collate and organise all of the necessary information needed for the Health Check itself. A further meeting was then arranged with the organisation for the Health Check itself.

Health Check meetings were nearly always held at the organisation's premises so that they would be able to reference the necessary paperwork needed as evidence. During the process the Assessor asked the Representative each question on the Health Check document in turn, each one designed to assess some aspect of the capability of the VCO. The Facilitator supported the Representative by explaining questions if required and placing the VCOs processes and practices in the context of the Health Check. Both the Assessor and Facilitator were at hand to offer the organisation advice, guidance and good practice.

Once the Health Check meeting was finished, the Assessor and Facilitator collated the information they had been given and completed the score sheet and action plan for the group. Some days later, having been checked, this was then sent to the VCO, encouraging them to complete any actions so that their score could be revised (upwards).

A follow up meeting was held if required, and any relevant sections of the Health Check reassessed. Amendments were made to the relevant documents by the Assessor and re-issued to the participating organisation.

Throughout the process the project team ensured that they were always available by phone to support the organisations and answer any questions they may have had.

Successful accreditations are either ‘green’ or ‘amber’. *Green* scores are those 80% or above overall and relate to a three-year Accreditation, whilst scores between 60% and 80% are considered *Amber*, where the VCO concerned must re-accredit after 12-months. Scores below 60% are *Red* scores and do not result in Accreditation being achieved.

Summary Results

| Organisation | Organisation Type | ILCM Level Estimated by the VCO itself | Services that are/could be offered on the neighbourhood (as stated by the VCO) | Final ILCM Level Achieved and Rating (Red, Amber, Green) |
|--------------|---|--|--|--|
| A | Small Community Youth Group | 1 | Regular Saturday morning 'free' art activities and refreshments, provided to children / young people of all ages. | Level 2 (green) |
| B | Private Company with a charitable arm involved in the Arts | 3 | Art workshops (music, dance, art) for families, intergenerational music, dance workshops. Youth art, dance groups. | Level 3 (green) |
| C | Community Group operating a recreation ground | 3 | Group focusing on the physical redevelopment of a recreation ground, now attempting to develop events and wider community interest. Focuses mainly on young people. | Level 3 (amber) |
| D | Registered charity with several sub regional outlets | 3 | Housing advice and guidance for young people, as well as emergency housing and youth activities. | Level 3 (green) |
| E | Sub-regional Charity delivering ground-works, and community engagement services | 4 | Delivers a wide range of services. Communities department delivers play days and accredited play / youth worker training, youth work, peer participation, general advice, debts, benefits and housing advice. | Level 4 (green) |
| F | Registered Charity and Local Infrastructure organisation | 4 | Local Infrastructure Organisation (LIO) and umbrella organisation for several community groups. Enabler for smaller community groups in the neighbourhood and provide basic infrastructure to groups including back office support, accommodation, information, advice and guidance. | Level 4 (green) |
| G | Volunteer Bureau and Registered Charity | 4 | Volunteer bureau providing brokerage service for volunteers and clients as well as information, advice and guidance. | Level 4 (amber) |
| H | Neighbourhood / Residents Engagement Group | 1 or 2 | Intending to put a community building on the estate for the residents to use, young people being a significant beneficiary group. | Level 2 (green) |
| J | Voluntary Organisation serving those with special needs | 4 | Work based training for young people/adults with learning / physical disabilities, placements from local secondary schools. | Level 3 (amber) |

Impact Assessment

Although the pilot was delivered over a very short period and although the main purpose was to identify the level of competence of the organisations in a systematic manner, it was also considered important to understand the overall impact of conducting this type of assessment programme within the organisation and the cohort of immediate beneficiaries.

The table shown below provides an overall assessment of the impact of the pilot (blank indicates unknown or none yet identified):

| Organisation | VCO Staff directly affected | VCO Trustees / Committee Members | Benefits cascaded to staff | Benefits cascaded to beneficiaries | Future benefits to beneficiaries (next 24 months) |
|---------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| A | 0 | 4 | 0 | 35 | ? |
| B | 1 | 0 | | | 25 (inc. 5 trustees) |
| C | 0 | 1 | 0 | | Treneere community |
| D | 1 | 0 | | | 25 (inc. 10 trustees) |
| E | 4 | 0 | 0 | | 60 (inc. 10 trustees) |
| F | 3 | 0 | 0 | | 35 (inc. 5 trustees) |
| G | 2 | 5 | 1 | 30 | ? |
| H | 0 | 1 | 3 | Treneere community | 5 (trustees) |
| J | 3 | 2 | 0 | | 15 |
| TOTALS | 14 | 13 | 4 | 65+ | 165+ |

This suggests that the impact of an integrated assessment programme along the lines of ILCM has the power to improve the quality of working practices far beyond those directly involved in the ILCM assessment process.

It also suggests that *small projects* in a focused geographical area such as deprived neighbourhoods, using even modest funding sources such as NRF or other small grants schemes can make a significant contribution in raising VCO service delivery standards.

Feedback from Participants

The feedback from the VCOs taking part in the pilot speaks for itself:

- (The process has) “helped us tighten up procedures and encouraged directors to take more of an active part in structure and policies”
- “I liked that we were able to look at how we are doing things as a group”
- “Focused and enabled much thought and reflection on current practice...allowed me to share this with the trustees”
- “Has reinforced the issues for us as an organisation and enabled us to go back to the board with the evidence”
- “An excellent opportunity for an in-depth assessment, the diversity of the VCS means that structure and focus may need to be slightly adapted to each organisation”
- “Provides an opportunity to re-assess the whole company, in particular areas that I have little input/contact”
- “Very helpful, it encouraged me to continue with the sessions and focus on the way ahead”
- “I thought it was fine, not pressurised in any way”

Follow Up

Due to the very short timeline, it was not possible to follow up project participants in order to continue their organisational development or to assess their engagement with the neighbourhood partnership.

However, on the strength of the evaluation and subsequent presentation to the Neighbourhood Partnership Board, the team has subsequently applied for and gained funding to develop a full-scale deployment project in Treneere.

This project is now underway and links directly to a small grants fund for the neighbourhood. VCOs applying to the fund must agree to being assessed through the Inter-Link Capability Model as part of the eligibility criteria. In addition, they must contract to work with the Neighbourhood Partnership Team to deliver against a specific target or targets within the *neighbourhood strategy document*. In effect, the ILCM is being used as a pre-commissioning assessment tool by the neighbourhood partnership.

Further work has now been launched elsewhere: A pilot has also been launched in a second deprived neighbourhood in another District, and more wide-reaching programme of community development using the ILCM has been launched in four further Districts. The *Local Area Agreement* outcome ‘Strong 1’ for Cornwall now has the ILCM embedded within it as a means to deliver stronger communities and work is progressing to use the ILCM as a commissioning and pre-procurement tool.

Summary

- VCO engagement is essential if renewal in deprived neighbourhoods is to be effective and sustainable: It has been demonstrated that the ILCM can engage VCOs effectively whatever their size, including the smallest community group.
- There is general concern that capacity building efforts designed to achieve engagement does not reach the ‘grass roots’: The ILCM is accepted and well-liked by VCOs, and in particular small community groups and is an ideal partnership working tool bringing together LSPs, CENs, Neighbourhood Partnerships and VCOs.
- There is a perpetual risk of ‘parachuting in’ VCOs into deprived neighbourhoods: The ILCM provides a tool for Neighbourhood Partnerships to engage VCOs, to focus them on neighbourhood priorities and enable long term involvement with residents and local activists.
- Commissioning is a barrier to the involvement of many grass-roots groups: the ILCM transforms commissioning from a barrier to an enabler.
- Small grants schemes are a particularly useful means to fund the initial engagement of VCOs using the ILCM.
- The ILCM process values the role of community development officers: ILCM provides community development activities with a framework and clear objectives within a neighbourhood / community.
- The ILCM profoundly affects many within a VCO, beyond those directly involved in the Health Check process.

Further Information

Further information may be obtained from the ILCM Treneere Pilot Project Team:

c/o Nigel Paul
ILCM Community Interest Company
The Penwith Centre
Parade St
Penzance
TR18 4BU
Cornwall / Kernow

Tel: 01736-334670
Email: enquiries@ilcm.org.uk