



Sustainability and A bun & a Blether by Gordon Johnston

This paper discusses building sustainable networks with reference to the Bun & a Blether project run by a Change Network with the Hope Cafe at its core. The project use social contact theory to generate discussion on mental health issues through structured workshop discussions organised in workplaces and aims to increase understanding by challenging stigma. The paper was written after an e-mail interview with Donna Barrowman, Executive Director of Hope Café. More information on the change network is available on the About The Change Networks page of the toolkit.

Key Questions on Building Sustainable Networks

1. Can your network be sustained without project activity?

It is doubtful that the Network would survive, as it is the project activity that keeps those involved engaged. The project is making a clear difference and that provides ongoing motivation.

It is worth noting here that there has been some discussion within the research team about the use of the term "Change Network". Many of the organisations who have received funding see their Change Network as a structure for delivering and managing a project, rather than as an ongoing network in the traditional third sector definition of the term.

2. Should we reach beyond sustainability into flourishing?

The expectation is that the project will grow. There was some initial confusion around the term "flourish", although once explained the answer was very clear.

3. What are the most important resources in supporting your network's sustainability?

Please choose your top four and rank them.

People with lived experience 1

Money 2

Time 3

Energy 4

The project could not operate successfully if it was not delivered by people with their own lived experience. This is an integral part of the workshops that the project delivers. This finding is entirely consistent with social contact theory, as research has shown much greater effectiveness in talking stigma where interventions are delivered by people from the stigmatised group.

4. What are the challenges that your network faces in terms of sustainability?

Funding is seen as the biggest challenge. The project could, in theory, be delivered by volunteers rather than paid staff, but there are still costs involved in supporting volunteers properly. It is a clear part of the Hope Café ethos that investment is made in volunteers to give them a high quality volunteering experience.

5. Do you have mechanisms in place to ensure that you can be sustainable (even in the event of change)?

At present employers are offered the project's workshop sessions free of charge. The hope is that large employers will see the value to their staff and be willing to pay once project funding ends. Work has started on adapting the project for use with children and young people, which may enable access to different funding streams.

6. Reflect on the initial members' list from the Change Network application - has this membership changed and why?

The application stated that support would be given by NHS Lanarkshire (via Healthy Working Lives), Lanarkshire Recovery Network and South Lanarkshire Council. They continue to be involved and it is hoped that other partners can be engaged as the project grows.

Again it is worth noting that the context here is of partners supporting a particular project delivery rather than members of a network.

7. Is your network dependent on any key people?

Donna Barrowman, Executive Director of Hope Café, is the driving force behind the project, and indeed much of the organisations excellent work.

Conclusion

The project is working well as a funded intervention. There are real possibilities of income generation through larger employers and good relationships are being established with several in the area. There is an opportunity here for an excellent intervention to be sustained after the initial project funding ends.