

## Outcomes of the community anchor connector-attractor workshop held at the Third Sector Research Centre on 26 October 2010

### Background

In June 2009, we held a conference about Community Anchors. We used the Bromley-by-Bow Centre, Community Links and Toynbee Hall as exemplars. The conference was illuminating and highlighted key challenges for Community Anchors including the vexed question: how can multi-purpose organisations demonstrate their organisational effectiveness? Our subsequent work has concentrated on this issue (see *Community Anchors – Securing their Position* in <http://www.uel.ac.uk/risingeast/essays/2010-02-24.htm>). The workshop provided a valuable opportunity to develop this work further through critical discussions and reflections between experienced and knowledgeable practitioners. It was attended by: trustees and managers from Community Anchors; support organisations, funders and academics.

### Reflections on main themes discussed

1. Attractors and connectors were considered useful in assessing and evidencing Community Anchors' performance.
2. The notion that attractors and connectors are **proxies** for some important 'outcome' elements of Community Anchors' performance was not challenged. However, neither was it seriously tested.
3. Attractors and connectors might appear to be essentially **process indicators**. It is arguable that a concentration on 'processes' (attractors and connectors taken 'as processes') is a useful way of exploring – and accumulating reasonably convincing evidence of – the ways in which well-functioning Community Anchors respond to local needs.
4. Further, it was accepted that, when local people are 'connected', there are likely to be **worthwhile substantive 'outcomes'** that are central to Community Anchors' mission/values.
5. Preparation for the workshop – and the event itself – served to encourage a change in our working definition (or perhaps 'model') of the well-functioning 'Community Anchor'. We had previously taken a simple approach and defined Community Anchors as 'locally-based multi-purpose organisations'. However, we have now included '**responsiveness to local need**'.<sup>1</sup>

### A revised model of the well-functioning Community Anchor

6. A vital element of Community Anchors' essential purpose is to be:
  - 6.1. 'locally-based' ('place'); and
  - 6.2. 'locally-responsive', and in that sense 'attractive'.
7. Because the needs of local communities are many and various, Community Anchors usually aim to be 'multi-purpose', 'holistic' and 'connective'.
8. Their success as Community Anchors is affected by:
  - 8.1. their reputation for trust worthiness that is 'attractive' to local people;
  - 8.2. sufficient 'independence' in terms of finance and good governance to reject the queen's (or other funders') shilling; and
  - 8.3. their reputation for solving practical problems and for providing opportunities, for example, for dealing with housing problems, debt crises, and providing activities for children.

### Points prompted by the group sessions

9. The 'Big Society' might bring funding that is prescriptive and challenges Community Anchors' 'independence'.

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1. An organisation – albeit locally-based and multi-purpose – that is delivering only services that are initiated, specified and funded by other organisations (such as local Councils) would not fit the model. This suggests an important link between 'organisational independence' and 'organisational responsiveness'.

10. Big national charities are currently in predatory mode. There is a significant risk that Community Anchors' 'local responsiveness' will be undervalued or ignored.
11. If they are to be truly 'locally-responsive', there is probably a natural limit to the geographical scope and diffusion of a Community Anchor's activities. However, federal models of central support are imaginable by which genuinely local organisations derive such back office services as HR, finance and estates from an umbrella organisation that covers a wider area than the Community Anchor model might itself sustain. This approach might combine local responsiveness and increased efficiency, leading to greater financial security and greater independence.
12. By widening the criteria that funders take into account, well-documented 'attractor-connector' evidence has the potential to:
  - 12.1. demonstrate Community Anchors' value for money; and
  - 12.2. counter the risk that, in straitened times, funders will concentrate on silo-based provision – to Community Anchors' and local people's disadvantage.
13. Political influence ('clout' and 'shout') are still influential in funding decisions. Value for money criteria are not always applied. However, well-documented 'attractor-connector' evidence might be particularly useful if 'social clauses' are introduced into public contracts.
14. Whilst SROI seems to be favoured by government and other funders (including 'social impact bonds'), it does not work well outside or across silos and is only applicable to Community Anchors within each silo. Consequently, it is not an appropriate tool for measuring Community Anchors' effectiveness 'as organisations'.
15. Data management is key to the demonstration of 'attraction', 'connection' and the 'community development' aspect of Community Anchors' activities. In the morning session, Ian Powell (bassac) referred to the data tracking at Bristol Barton Hill. There is a case for wider dissemination of the method.
16. There is a need for some external support for organisations efforts to measure organisational performance. Because of day-to-day delivery (and, sometimes, survival) pressures, organisations often lack the resources needed to measure their performance as organisations.
17. Local universities might have the relevant research expertise but sometimes the presence of external researchers can distort activities and reduce the validity of the findings. We need ways of resourcing Community Anchors to conduct some of their own research on outcomes.
18. 'Attractor-connector' evidence can assist Boards of Trustees to understand the importance of 'whole organisation' factors and to use these concepts to make a more convincing case for Community Anchors.

## Next steps

19. We are heartened that there is sufficient enthusiasm to take this project forward. The next stage is to develop some clear measures to assess attractors and connectors. Our aim is to develop realistic and practicable methods that will enable Community Anchors to evaluate themselves routinely and to demonstrate that – over and above their achievements within particular silos of service – there are worthwhile outcomes that flow from their continued presence and responsiveness in their localities.

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