Evaluation of Argyll and Bute Local Services Initiative (ABLSI)

For Argyll and Bute Social Enterprise Network (ABSEN)

January 2013
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1. Introduction

This Section describes the background of the Argyll and Bute Local services Initiative and our method of evaluating the project.

1.1 The Argyll and Bute Local Services Initiative (ABLSI)

ABLSI is a partnership between Argyll and Bute Council (ABC), NHS Highland, HIE, the Carnegie UK Trust, Argyll Voluntary Action and ABSEN with the aim of identifying service areas with a real potential for co-operation between the public sector and the third sector, and where co-production might lead to better and more efficient services.

The Carnegie UK Trust has a long history of championing the work of rural communities, providing research on rural issues and supporting rural communities to improve services. In 2007 Carnegie UK Trust published ‘A Charter for Rural Communities’ that sets out its vision for successful rural communities in the future and the role that enterprising rural communities can play supported by the public, private and third sectors.

In the same year the Carnegie Trust presented the Charter in Argyll and Bute, where their ideas found resonance with the Council and both parties agreed to work together in the Demonstration Project to explore social enterprise solutions to service delivery in rural communities, with the aim to:

★ optimise access to services;
★ create and sustain jobs; and
★ increase the involvement of service users and communities in service design and delivery.

The Demonstration Project embarked on a process of engagement with communities across the area and hosted 10 events, attended by 79 third sector organisations and gathered more than 250 responses.

One of the results of the Demonstration Project was the establishment of ABLSI in 2010. ABLSI was established for three years to focus on some of the recommendations from the Demonstration Project and to further develop co-operation with the third sector, implement the recommendations of the Demonstration Project, and recast the public sector’s relationship with the third sector locally.

The Demonstration Project focused on five areas: improving access to information access to support for the third sector; making Council funding easier to access; making asset transfer more straightforward; improving access for the third sector to public contracts; and co-ordinating training and skills development for the sector.

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1 Harnessing the Potential of the Third Sector to Help Achieve Council Objectives, Demonstration Project, 2010
The ABLSI project was set up to stimulate, facilitate and support co-production with three key objectives:

★ develop an evidence base of successful co-operation and co-production between the public sector and the Third Sector in Argyll and Bute to influence key decision makers within the public sector;
★ identify the key success factors for co-production of services and delivery of services by the Third Sector; and
★ provide recommendations to support closer co-operation between the public sector and social enterprise providers in local service delivery.

The ABLSI Steering Group was established as the main vehicle to deliver the project’s objectives, and Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) provided £ 90,000 funding for ABLSI for the period 2010-13.

The Steering Group started by identifying a number of areas where there were issues in collaboration between the Council and the Third Sector and where it could make a difference. Steering Group members then presented the ABLSI project and the advantages of working with the Third Sector to Service Managers as part of ABC Service Review process. ABLSI also offered the Service Managers funding and staff support to identify best practice examples, undertake consultations and skills audits, provide training and facilitate co-operation. Five service areas accepted this offer of support:

★ Adult Care Services
★ Children and Families
★ Development Policy
★ Education
★ Waste Management

To capture the learning, ABLSI generated 13 case studies of local service delivery areas where it has provided guidance and support. For each case study an in-depth interview with the responsible ABC Service Manager and the relevant social enterprise provider was conducted. The ABLSI Steering Group organised regular ‘Learning Workshops’ focused on reflection and learning.

The ABLSI project is now due to come to an end in March 2013\(^2\) and ABSEN (Argyll and Bute Social Enterprise Network, the lead third sector representative on the Steering Group) now seeks to evaluate the learning and impact of the ABLSI project.

1.2 Research Methodology

The study was carried out by Social Value Lab between November 2012 and January 2013. It was based on a qualitative research design that involved a number of main stages:

\(^2\) Closure of the project has subsequently slipped to June 2012.
A focus group discussion meeting with the ABLSI Steering Group, to understand the origins of the project, the timeline of activities, and a first level perception on partnership working and impact.

¬ Review of documents relating to ABLSI, including strategy documents, budget information, evaluations and other relevant documents.

¬ Extended in-depth interviews with all members of the ABLSI Steering Group.

¬ Semi-structured telephone interviews with a selection of Argyll and Bute Council staff and social enterprise representatives who have been involved in ABLSI interventions.

The following ABLSI Steering Group members were interviewed:

★ Bill Stewart - Argyll & Bute Social Enterprise Network (ABSEN)
★ Kirsty Clark - ABSEN
★ Ailsa Clark - ABSEN
★ Arlene Cullum - Argyll & Bute Council Social Enterprise Team
★ David Rennie - Argyll & Bute Council Social Enterprise Team
★ Alison McGrory - NHS
★ Nick Wilding - Carnegie UK Trust
★ John Watt - Doctoral Researcher, Strathclyde University
★ Glenn Heritage - Manager Argyll Voluntary Action (AVA)

Telephone interviews were also conducted with:

★ ABC - Service Manager Children & Families
★ ABC - Adult Care (Residential Care)
★ ABC - Development Policy Manager
★ ABC - Procurement
★ Island Quality Care
★ ArtsQwest

The findings of the evaluation research are contained in this report.

1.3 Strategic Context

Argyll and Bute is the second largest of Scotland’s 32 Local Authorities, while also one of the least populated (25th out of 32). Around 17% of the local population live on islands and 55% of live in settlements smaller than 3,000 people, with many living in remote locations outside of the main settlements. The population of Argyll and Bute is also ageing, with the populations of young and working age people falling.
Delivering services to an ageing population in a sparsely populated rural area is both challenging and relatively expensive. Therefore ABC has put in place a number of policies and strategies to ensure effective and efficient service delivery.

Argyll and Bute Community Plan / Single Outcome Agreement

The Argyll and Bute Community Plan (ABCP) and Single Outcome Agreement (SOA) set out the joint priorities of the Community Planning Partnership for service delivery in the Local Authority area. These align to the Scottish Government's National Outcomes as set out in the National Performance Framework.

At the time of the project there were four main themes in the ABCP: Economy, Environment, Social Affairs and Third Sector and Communities. The main themes that the ABLSI project contributes to are:

- **Economy** – by contributing to the development of the social enterprise sector ABLSI contributed to creating new businesses and creating an environment where new and existing businesses can succeed. The development of social enterprises is identified as one of the specific outcomes.
- **Environment** – through some of the social enterprises assisted by ABLSI (e.g. Recycling, Coast and Countryside Trust).

Procurement Reform Bill

In 2011 the Government expressed its intention to bring forward a Bill to update the legislative framework for procurement decisions and support greater use of social and environmental considerations. The consultation period on the proposed Procurement Reform Bill has now closed.

A specific aim of this Bill is to increase the access to public contracts for the third sector. It is expected that the Bill will place a duty on public sector procurement teams to consider how social value from all major procurement exercises can be maximised. This means that public sector organisations need to find ways to foster positive relationships with third sector providers in pre-procurement dialogue and find ways to level the playing field and secure the added value.

Carnegie UK Trust

The Carnegie UK Trust has a long history of championing the work of rural communities, providing insights on rural issues and supporting rural communities to improve services. The innovative work of several local organisations to address this issue in Argyll and Bute drew the attention of Carnegie UK Trust as it was conducting a UK-wide inquiry into the future for rural communities 2004-2007 (A Charter

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3 The Community Planning Partnership structure has changed and the thematic groups are no longer in place, except the Third Sector and Communities thematic group.
for Rural Communities\textsuperscript{4}). The inquiry highlighted the role that the Social Enterprise Sector can have in unlocking local peoples’ capacity to take action to improve their communities.

In 2007, Argyll and Bute Council and Carnegie UK Trust agreed to work together to explore this role. The questions raised were about pressing issues:

- Access to services
- Retaining employment opportunities
- How communities could come together to plan and prioritise the services they required

In 2008, as part of their Rural Programme, Carnegie UK Trust set up the ‘FierySpirits’ Community of Practice (http://fieryspirits.com) for rural activists and practitioners throughout the UK and Ireland. As a co-funder, Highlands and Islands Enterprise agreed to support the creation of the Argyll and Bute Local Services Initiative (ABLSI) in 2010 to test the role of the social enterprise sector in service delivery in practice and then share the learning through the Community of Practice.

\textsuperscript{4} http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/getattachment/a2d7553b-3457-4567-b51a-f01c5a2d8cd6/A-Charter-for-Rural-Communities.aspx
2. Working Together

This Section explores the partnership working between the local authority and social enterprise sector and the learning stemming from ABLSI.

**Partnership Working**

ABLSI is not a legal entity in its own right, but a partnership of public and third sector partners based around working together to improve public service delivery in Argyll and Bute. It did deliver services or interventions under a common banner, although not always recognised as such by the recipients. The ABLSI Steering Group has been the main vehicle for ABLSI to achieve its objectives. The effectiveness of the partnership working within the Steering Group is therefore crucial to the success of ABLSI.

All eight interviewed partners reported a great level of satisfaction with how the partnership worked. Partners mentioned several key factors that contributed to effectiveness of the partnership, including:

- The ABLSI Steering Group is an equal partnership with democratic processes, not dominated by either the public or social enterprise sector.
- Each of the partners brings a specific expertise to the table, ensuring a full complement of skills, knowledge and experience in the group.
- The different perspectives of each partner are acknowledged and worked through, helped by the reflective nature of the ‘Learning Workshops’ and the independent mediation of the Carnegie Trust and Strathclyde University.
- During the period of implementation, trust and strong personal relationships have developed that have helped to overcome differences of opinion and supported the delivery of initiatives on the ground.
- The involvement of the Carnegie Trust and Strathclyde University has been highly valued and gave the project credibility.

From the consultation some areas of improvement were identified:

- The start of the process was perceived to be unfocussed and lacking action. Partly this is due to the nature of the project. Before embarking on the initiative, partners needed to get to know each other, understand their differing and sometimes conflicting interests, undertake the research to facilitate learning, come up with a shared agenda and plan their actions.
- The composition of the Steering Group has not been consistent from the start. People that have come in at the Steering Group at a later date on occasions found it difficult to get up to speed with the subject matter.
- The NHS was somewhat slower to play an active role in the project. This resulted in the learning and ABLSI supported interventions focussed mainly on Council activity.
The ABLSI project could have been more closely aligned to the Community Planning process. This would have increased the reach of the project, within the public sector as well as the third sector.

The initial phase of the project was taken forward without the active endorsement or involvement of other public services (e.g. Police).

Role of Argyll Voluntary Action (AVA)

AVA has formally been a partner in the Steering Group, although did not attend many meetings and ‘Learning Workshops’ and did not play an active role in the Steering Group. There was a genuine feeling of regret over the limited input and involvement of AVA among the other Steering Group members. Some of the benefits of a more involved AVA would include:

- A broader focus of the project on the whole Third Sector, rather than on the specific social enterprise sector represented by ABSEN.
- A reduced risk of duplication, such as AVA’s ‘Involving to Devolving, Influencing Change’ that looked at ways of getting local people more involved in service design and delivery.
- Better opportunities to share learning and resources.

AVA is a large organisation with a wide remit and about 2,000 members and did not have the time or resources to make a greater contribution to ABLSI. AVA kept track of the progress of ABLSI through the minutes of meetings and reports.

Learning

One of ABLSI’s main objectives was to gather and publish evidence of successful co-design and co-production examples and collectively learn from them. To achieve this objective ABLSI has produced a set of 13 Case Studies and extracted the learning from them. Table 2.1 shows the result of the case studies.

Table 2.1: ABLSI Case Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case Study</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>ABLSI Role</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adult Care Services</td>
<td>Two ABC Care Services interested in transfer to Social Enterprise Care Homes and tendering for contracts</td>
<td>– Facilitated discussion with the Council development worker who supported staff that had shown interest. \   – Researched issues and barriers raised by staff thus providing informed support to future transfers of service.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Case Study</td>
<td>Description</td>
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| Stramash                        | Transfer of Council run outdoor learning activities to a newly created Social Enterprise | – Interviewed key personnel from both the statutory organisations and the third sector to inform and support the recommendations in the ABLSI report.  
– Provided training on legal issues and procurement. |
| Children and Families Services  | Service review to re-vamp the way in which organisations tender for services and how the council delivers grants to third sector groups | – Took part in the review of Children and Family Services.  
– Co-funded a series of consultation events with third sector delivery partners.  
– Interviewed key personnel from the funding authority and the third sector delivery organisations to inform and support the recommendations in the main report. |
| Short Break Bureau              | Third Sector providers of respite care in a Public Social Partnership Pilot with the Council | – Interviewed key personnel involved in setting up the PSP and service deliverers gaining insight to how the transfer took place.  
– Researched the case studies and other documentation of the PSP. |
| Reshaping Care for Older People | Co-production model between ABC and third sector service providers to provide care services in Argyll and Bute | – Provided input on Critical Factors and Learning from ABLSI to inform on-going work.  
– ABLSI representation on the RCOP project board.  
– Presented the work of ABLSI and the “critical factors model” for local service delivery on the co-production conference in November 2012. |
<p>| Health and Wellbeing Network    | Sharing of information and networking opportunities for organisations working in health and distributing Council funding to organisations. | – Researched the health and Wellbeing Network to extract learning for other services looking to involve third sector partners in this approach to resource allocation. |</p>
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<tr>
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| Argyll & Isles Coast &     | A partnership of organisations investigating the possibility of developing an | – Supported the steering group to put in place structures allowing the setting up of an organisation fit to carry out the role envisaged.  
| Countryside Trust          | independent Trust.                                                           | – Supported a community consultation process.                                                   |
|                            |                                                                             | – Interviewed key personnel from both the steering group and the stakeholders.                 |
| ArtsQwest                  | An arts social enterprise set up as a supporting measure to budget reductions to the current music service part. | – Discussed issues with key development workers who supported the group.                       |
|                            |                                                                             | – Interviewed key personnel from the organisation.                                             |
| Atlantis Leisure           | A social enterprise sports and leisure facility with a 21 year lease of a council facility. | – Worked with experienced Atlantis representatives to identify critical factors that had shaped the success of the leisure service transfer.  
|                            |                                                                             | – Identified information relating to contract arrangements for stakeholders, key skills and capacity within the organisation, and leadership and innovation across the stakeholders involved in the service transfer.  
<p>|                            |                                                                             | – Provided support to Atlantis to consider impact measurement information in light of contract renegotiations. |
|                            |                                                                             | – Interviewed key personnel from both the statutory organisations and the third sector groups.|
| Kintyre Recycling          | Social Enterprise providing recycling services and employment opportunities for people with learning difficulties in the Kintyre area. | – Mediation to improve communication between KR and ABC and support in renegotiating contract terms |
| Re-JIG                     | Third sector organisation delivering recycling services on Islay and Jura     | – Mediation to renegotiate the transfer from SLA to contract                                   |
| Mull and Iona Community    | Community-led recycling service delivered by a social enterprise              | – Mediation to renegotiate Council support                                                    |
| Trust                      |                                                                             |                                                                                              |</p>
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fyne Futures</td>
<td>Social enterprise involved in recycling and carbon reduction</td>
<td>Mediation to improve communication between FF and ABC and support in renegotiating contract terms</td>
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From the case studies a number of key learning points have been identified:

- A strong working relationship between the public sector and the social enterprise providers and regular open communication is a key to successful service delivery
- Service needs should be established through early and ongoing community consultation
- The social enterprise providers need to become better in assessing and communicating their wider social impact.
- Support networks, such as ABSEN and the Third Sector Partnership, are critical to assist social enterprise providers in dealing with the public sector.

The ‘Learning Workshops’ that the ABLSI Steering Group held on a regular basis, have been crucial to maximise the learning element of the project. The ‘Learning Workshops’ allowed time for in-depth discussion of themes and issues, reflection, and a thorough understanding of shared objectives and barriers for public sector and the social enterprise participants.

Seven of the eight interviewees mentioned the ‘Learning Workshops’ as an important factor for developing and embedding the learning points.
3. ABLSI Impact

This Section assesses the impact of the ABLSI project on the Local Authority, the changed relationships between Argyll and Bute Council and the social enterprise sector and the emerging impact of ABLSI on social enterprise development in Argyll and Bute.

Impact of the Project

The ABLSI project has had an influence on the way the Council and other public agencies perceive and work with the social enterprise sector in Argyll and Bute. However, the full impact of ABLSI can only meaningfully be assessed over time. ABLSI has been involved with a number of co-production initiatives and has delivered interventions in processes where the Council interacted with the third sector; these have had an immediate effect on the sector.

Skills Development

ABLSI has organised, funded and delivered a number of training sessions for representatives of the third and public sector, including:

- Legal workshops for recycling organisations delivered by MacRoberts Solicitors
- TUPE workshop delivered by MacRoberts
- Procurement workshops on how to complete a PQQ\(^5\)

From working with ABLSI, the third sector providers now report to have a better understanding of full cost recovery. This is set within a general context where third sector providers often do not have a clear understanding of the full cost of their service and sometimes have the tendency to deliver ‘what needs done’, rather than the activities that are contracted.

The ABLSI project has also provided information on and signposted organisations to training and development opportunities delivered by other providers.

From our consultation with the Steering Group partners it became clear that over the period of the project partners have learned much from each other.

In particular third sector providers developed a better understanding of what drives public sector behaviour, the difficulties and barriers Council staff have to overcome within the system to achieve the desired results, and the actions necessary to facilitate better partnership working.

\(^5\) Pre-Qualification Questionnaire
Likewise the public sector partners developed a better insight in the social objectives of the third sector, the way that they can contribute to Council objectives through service delivery, and their difficulties in achieving financial sustainability.

Most importantly, mutual understanding has further developed between the public and third sector partners involved in ABLSI.

**Council Grants**

ABLSI had a significant impact on how the Council allocates grant funding to the third sector.

ABC, like other local authorities, has had to achieve significant efficiency savings (15% in 2011) in its Children and Families Services and carried out a comprehensive service review to assess how to achieve this. ABLSI was involved in the service redesign and commissioned Governance International to facilitate a one-day event for third sector providers of Children and Families services in May 2011.

The outcome of the event was that the Council achieved a better understanding of what the third sector providers could deliver, how working more closely with the sector could improve service delivery and how more co-operation with the sector could help achieve efficiency savings.

ABC and the third sector providers embarked on a process of co-production of Children’s and Families grants, supported by ABLSI, to redesign the allocation of grants and the process by which third sector providers would access these. The main outcomes for the process were:

- Creating a level playing field between public sector and social enterprise providers. The Council services now have to bid for grants the same way, and in open, transparent competition with the third sector providers.
- Contributing to the ongoing unified process for all nine Council grant funds, effectively merging these nine funds into one.
- A more favourable attitude to providing a single payment at the start of the year, where appropriate.
- Improved proportionality between the value of the grant and the volume of supporting documents and information.
- A named contact Council contact for each grant application.

The learning from the co-production process in the Children and Families Service has cascaded to other services and moved the process of developing a single application form for all Council grants along.

Traditionally most funding was awarded by ABC for just one year and third sector providers had to reapply for funding every year. Within the Children and Families Service this severely hindered the capacity of the third sector providers to plan, attract and retain staff and to grow their organisations. ABLSI provided evidence of these difficulties and made the case within the Council for longer term
funding. Now there is a willingness to investigate the possibility of longer funding contracts/grants on a case by case basis.

**Procurement and Tendering**

ABLSI’s activities have influenced the understanding of how services were contracted. It was common practice to issue short term contracts (recurring SLAs) with short notice of termination and little knowledge or understanding of the devastating effect this could have to third sector organisations. Through the use of mediation ABLSI helped the social enterprises secure a more balanced contract with Argyll and Bute Council. The work highlighted learning:

- The need for third sector organisations to learn how to negotiate better more balanced contracts.
- The need to talk to suppliers of services to better understand their needs and the long term viability of service delivery.
- Learning from this work highlighted the need for both parties to find common ground and greater understanding of each other’s needs to enable best value and lasting service delivery.

There was a common misunderstanding of the term SLA. External arrangements for suppliers of good/services are now clearly defined as “a contract to deliver services” or “a grant for services”.

As a result of the co-production process surrounding Children and Families Service’s grant funding, and the work with the community recycling sector, the procurement process has become more focused on outcomes, rather than outputs. These examples can now be used for other services.

From the case studies it has become clear that services and third sector providers do not measure the wider social impact of their activities. ABLSI has therefore re-developed the existing tool for social impact measurement and produced a Sustainability Impact Toolkit that can be used as a standard impact measurement framework in procurement across the local authority.

Many social enterprises do not have the capacity and resources to effectively market their services. ABLSI has funded a number of marketing materials for the sector that will help place them on the radar of public sector buyers.

In the community recycling sector there is a greater understanding of the influencing factors in relation to procurement with more focus on outcomes, rather than outputs.

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6 Service Level Agreement (internal agreements between council departments).
Service Design and Delivery
ABLSI has helped to establish two new social enterprises through funding legal expertise, advising on governance, and business planning. These are:

- ArtsQwest: a social enterprise run by Council Music Tutors that delivers music tuition and other arts activities to mitigate the effects of potential service reduction by the Council.
- Coast and Countryside Trust: a community-led trust to develop and maintain paths and outdoor facilities in Argyll and Bute.

ABLSI has supported two third sector providers in the adult care sector to submit a tender document for a Council contract. Although the bids were unsuccessful, some lessons were learned for the social enterprises and ABLSI is now helping the Council to look at ways to make tendering procedures more straightforward for third sector providers.

Attribution and Deadweight
ABLSI is a collaborative initiative between the public and the third sector and does not have a separate identity, dedicated staff or defined activities. The partners are all working in the field and facilitating co-operation is part of their core remit. Therefore it is difficult to differentiate between interventions carried out as part of ABLSI and those that would otherwise have been carried out as part of the on-going work of individual partners and staff. This makes it difficult to make any reasonable comments about attribution: what part of the outcomes achieved can be attributed to ABLSI and what part to others. What is clear is that ABLSI is providing an important focus and synergy, ensuring that the ‘whole is greater than the sum of the constituent parts’.

The ABLSI project is happening in a context of quickly changing models of public service delivery, influenced by reducing budgets, the imminent implementation of the Procurement Reform Bill and the wider community empowerment agenda. This makes it also difficult to assess deadweight: that what would have happened anyway, in the absence of the ABLSI project. However, the ABLSI funding allowed the Steering Group to allocate additional resources when appropriate, which speeded projects along and commission consultants and lawyers.

It is clear from our discussions outside of the ABLSI Steering Group that the ABLSI ‘brand’ is not yet well known. Consultees saw ABLSI activity as either the activities of the Council or ABSEN, rather than as part of a stand-alone initiative. This lack of visibility may hinder the continuation of the initiative in the future.
4. Taking Stock of ABLSI

This Section describes the strengths and weaknesses of the project and its critical success factors.

Strengths and Weaknesses

From our consultations, a number of main strengths and weaknesses of the ABLSI project emerged. The key strengths of the project included:

- Building on the evidence of the Demonstration Project
- A tried and tested framework (Carnegie Trust’s Charter for Rural Communities)
- High level Council buy-in, including Elected Members
- Input from the Carnegie Trust and Strathclyde University as expert advisors, independent mediators and critical friends
- Three year funding by HIE
- Having the right partners around the table
- Commitment and hard work from individual ABLSI Steering Group members
- Combined experience of the Steering Group
- A democratic process with an equal power balance within the Steering Group
- Dedicated time for reflection (e.g. Learning Workshops)
- Trust and strong personal relationships
- A focus on collective learning

There were also a number of weaknesses or barriers identified, including:

- Initial mistrust and lack of understanding between public and third sector
- Practical constraints, including lack of time, competing pressures on staff time, long distances and associated travel time caused by the rurality of the area, and the availability of additional resources for the project
- Lack of visibility of ABLSI and publicity associated with the project
- Limited input from AVA, the lead partner in the Third Sector Partnership, the third sector interface organisation in Argyll and Bute
- The Council’s internal processes, that were sometimes regarded as overly complex and lacking transparency to outside third sector providers
- The weak link to Community Planning structures, slow involvement of the NHS, and lack of involvement of other public sector partners (e.g. Police, Fire Services, JobCentre Plus, etc)

AVA’s input was restricted due to resource implications.
Critical Success Factors

A number of Critical Success Factors that have been identified as essential to the outcomes of the project and need to be covered in any continuation of the project. These include:

- The right partners, with commitment to the project
- A culture of trust and openness
- Presence of ‘independent’ partners (Carnegie, Strathclyde University)
- High level buy-in from partners
- Built-in time for reflection
- Focus on collective learning
- Adequate funding

Continuation Of The ABLSI Work

There is overwhelming support among the consultees for a continuation of the ABLSI work beyond the current phase of activity, due to end 31 March 2013. There was a feeling that the project has achieved much, but there is still work to be done.

A continuation of the ABLSI work would fit in with the changing context in which the third and public sector are operating: a continuing pressure on budgets and the introduction of the Procurement Reform Bill. An ABLSI continuation can help to sustain and improve local services while achieving required efficiency savings and helping the public sector in Argyll and Bute to fulfil the requirements of the Procurement Bill.

Partners have also identified a potential role for the Third Sector Partners in supporting the Asset Transfer agenda in Argyll and Bute. It is expected this agenda will be taken forward in the coming years, and will rely on strong relationships with the third sector, mutual trust, and an appropriate forum through which to share and progress ideas.

Most respondents to the consultation believed that a continuation of the ABLSI work requires a renewed commitment from all partners, the availability of staff time and a dedicated budget. In particular ABSEN, a social enterprise itself, will struggle to commit significantly to the project without additional resources. Many would like to broaden the membership of the Steering Group, with AVA and other public sector organisations involved, and a closer alignment to the Community Planning partnership and a more prominent role for the NHS and other public agencies.
5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This section reflects on the learning from this evaluation and makes recommendations for the future.

Conclusion

The ABLSI project has been a success in most respects. The partnership in the Steering Group has worked effectively. The ABLSI project has generated a wealth of evidence and learning for the third sector as well as public sector partners. It has been a catalyst for changes within the Council, and has positively influenced co-operation between the public and third sector in Argyll and Bute.

Perhaps the most important change brought about by the ABLSI project is a cultural shift. ABC is now increasingly willing and ready to consider social enterprise solutions and is more confident about the third sector’s capacity to deliver services on behalf of the Council. The third sector in turn has a better understanding of how the Council works (in particular ABSEN), has more confidence and trust in the Council, feels that the voice of the social enterprise sector is now heard within the Council, and is better able to realise the aspirations of the sector.

Recommendations

The co-design and co-production of local services with the third sector is becoming increasingly relevant in Argyll and Bute; a large rural local authority area with many pressing public service challenges and budgetary pressures. It is therefore essential that partners take steps to build on the progress of the ABLSI project during 2013/14 and beyond.

On the basis of the evaluation evidence, there are a number of main recommendations that should now be considered:

1. There is a need for a continuation of the ABLSI work.

2. The continuation of the ABLSI work should be established with a clear remit, including a limited number of specific objectives (e.g. co-production, asset transfer, procurement reform).

3. Learning and reflection and subsequent sharing of the gathered insights should continue to be part of the renewed remit of the ABLSI work.

4. ABLSI should get a renewed commitment from partners at the highest level. This should include a commitment of staffing and other resources.

5. The project should be robustly anchored within the Community Planning structure.
6. The continuation of the ABLSI work should be adequately funded to achieve results. The Steering Group should develop a business case for the continuation of the project that should address funding.

7. The continuation of the ABLSI work should be designed to retain an equal balance of power within the Steering Group between third sector and public sector partners. Finding one or more replacements for the Carnegie UK Trust and Strathclyde University as independent mediator and critical friend is recommended.

8. ABLSI should invest in creating a culture of trust and openness from the outset.

9. AVA should be more closely involved in the design of the ABLSI work. AVA’s role and contribution in a continuation of the ABLSI work should be explored at an early stage.

10. ABLSI should become more visible. It should produce a Marketing and Promotion Plan/Strategy and Steering Group members should take care to place a clearer distinction between core activity and work carried out within an ABLSI work plan.