

**Evaluation of LINKs
simulation event,
Bradford 22 October**

Executive Summary



More than 100 people met at the Carlisle Business Centre, Bradford, on 22 October 2007, to discuss their Local Involvement Network, or LINK, as expected to become operational on April 1st 2008.

The event simulated the activity of a Local Involvement Network through an experiential set of discussions. Six morning workshops generated points that were then fed back to the assembled audience in the afternoon for consideration as LINK issues.

'Essentially a community development project,' the success of a LINK is contingent upon a sense of ownership that is claimed and shaped at grass-roots level. To this end the day was successful in attracting concerned individuals, members of existing PPI forums, and community activists, as well as representatives from the voluntary and the statutory sector.

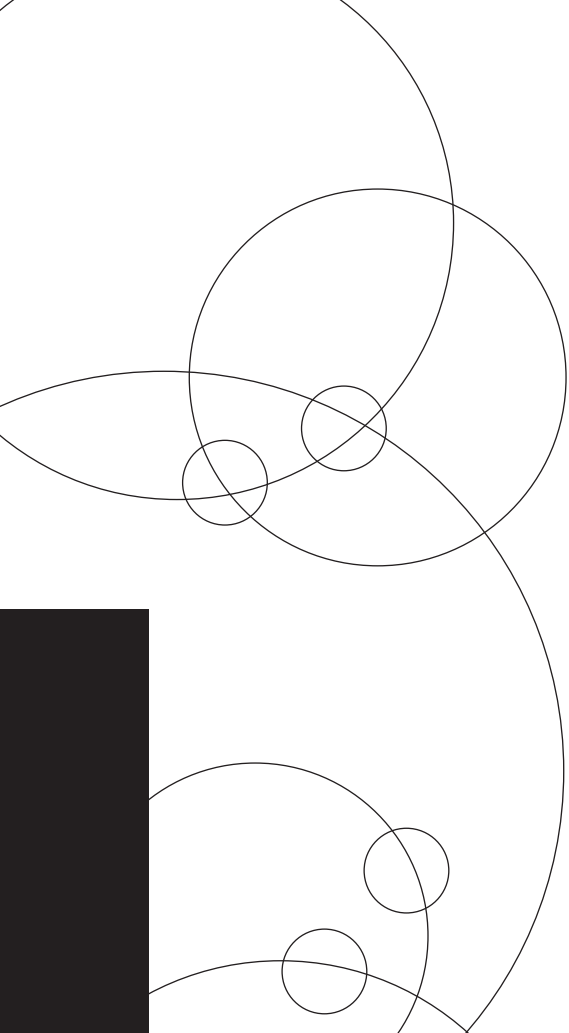
Three broad categories of opinion emerged from data gathered on the day:



1. The view that the LINK should be as locally and organically rooted as possible, and that top-down national guidance should not be allowed to get in the way of bottom-up community engagement.
2. The view that operational procedures should be rendered in simple, uncomplicated systems and language such as all might understand and engage with.
3. The view that a pragmatic approach was necessary to get the LINK up and running, in order to retain the momentum established by PPI and other local initiatives.

Within each of the three areas there were both tensions and solutions.

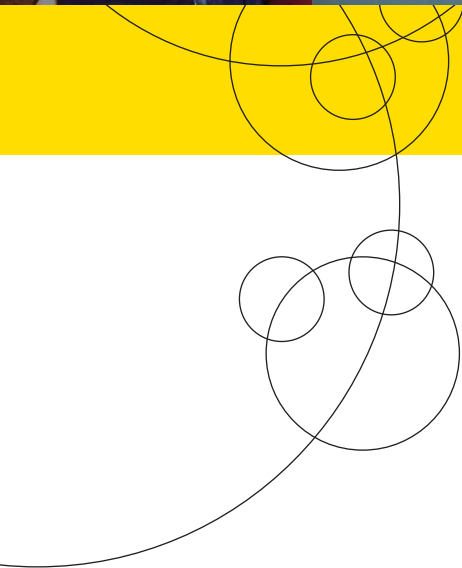
The clearest challenge was how to bridge the gap between particular voices and general agendas. For the LINK to operate effectively requires parties to sign-up to a common agenda. At the same time, though, a strong emphasis upon individual experience sits at the heart of the LINKs initiative, and was clearly evident during the simulation exercise. An ethical commitment to subjective modes of knowledge and expression underpinned many contributions.



This tension, between particular ways of seeing things and general ways of addressing them, was expressed in various forms. Arguments for change, at every level, were challenged by cries to ‘not reinvent the wheel.’ Arguments to attend to the overlooked needs of a particular community were challenged by cries to find issues that arose across service provision.

The argument for strictly local, bottom-up, experiential issue-generation clearly resonates with the spirit of the legislation. At the same time, the issues generated must ultimately crystallise as a network-wide agenda, to include those stakeholders under a statutory obligation to partake and support the LINK. But many of them seem uncertain as to exactly what they are partaking of.

In part this uncertainty is due to the fact that LINKs are not yet up and running. But in part this uncertainty would seem to reflect a deeper challenge, as to how in fact it will cohere the various voices and formulate an entity that is more than the sum of its parts.



To make engagement with health and social care an active, community-wide process will require a firm hand on the LINKs tiller in order to establish an agenda to which all stakeholders can subscribe. An often passionate commitment to enabling particular and exceptional voices to be heard is an asset that will need careful and sensitive steering if it is to result in a programme of activity commanding community-wide levels of support. The stated desire of most participants for more and better modes of engagement offers a clear opportunity for the LINK to establish itself as a new channel of communication. But to do this it must first of all develop an identity of its own.

The new LINK will need to move quickly, if the good will and energy of the simulation exercise of 22 October is not to be dissipated.

Uncertainties abound, but are eclipsed by an essential sympathy for the aims and values of the initiative, especially as they chime with experiential and subjective openings for otherwise hard to reach and seldom heard groups. No participants expressed dissatisfaction with the event. Of those who had problems with the LINKs initiative, there were none who were not seeking to be engaged at some level. In modelling that engagement the simulation exercise demonstrated both the difficulties and the opportunities of LINKs. As one participant said, 'we just need to get on with it and make it work.'

