

MULTI-AGENCY COMMUNITY SERVICES HUBS

SELECTING A MODEL TO MEET EXPECTATIONS

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Introduction

A wide range of multi-agency community service hubs¹ have been established in Australia in recent years, ranging from simple co-locations to fully integrated models. Multiple benefits are sought from these diverse models of community service hubs ranging from cost savings to collaborative development of new services through to broader community building goals.

Agencies planning for a hub will inevitably bring diverse reasons for participating and each is likely to have a different notion of what model of hub is desirable. In order to attract political and financial support for a proposed hub, there is a temptation to over-reach, to promise outcomes that, while desirable, are beyond the reach of some models.

Efforts made in the early planning stages to find common goals for the formation of a hub will pay off later in greater clarity about which model of hub will best suit the agencies individually and collectively; and this consensus will guide decisions on the myriad of practical questions arising in the implementation phase.

This paper proposes a useful first step for those starting out on the exciting journey of creating a community services hub – answering the key questions:

- What are we aiming to achieve together that we can't do individually?
- Who do we want to benefit most – the agencies themselves, their clients and/or the community/society at large?
- Are we able to dedicate the resources required, collectively and as individual agencies, to develop a hub capable of delivering those benefits?

This will enable a realistic answer to the question – what model of community services hub will deliver benefits valued by the stakeholders and fit within the available resources?

Why Form Community Hubs?

A simple definition of a community hub which is inclusive of diverse models and aspirations is proposed by Rossiter (2007 p.2) as '... a single multipurpose facility that accommodates a variety of services.' He observes that a hub may also include public spaces for people to meet.

Fine et al (2005 p.5) locate the recent emergence of community hubs in the evolution of the community services system. They refer to last century's 'large, integrated institutions such as orphanages, long stay mental hospitals and homes for the disabled' which were seen as inflexible and unable to respond to client needs.

¹ The literature on hubs is located within the literature on broader notions of 'integrated' community services which includes integration across multiple sites, such as precincts in local communities, through to statewide integration efforts where there is no physical focus point for service delivery. This literature also includes documentation of hubs in which a single agency attempts to integrate diverse human services delivered by the one agency eg early childhood services. As a result of this diversity similar terms are often used to refer to widely different concepts in different contexts. To avoid this confusion this paper limits its focus to physical hubs which contain multiple agencies attempting to work together in one site, a model which is increasingly emerging across Australia.

This paper does not explicitly explore the literature on early childhood hubs in detail as there are unique factors in the early years service system which impact on integration, such as deep historical professional divisions between early childhood teachers, child care educators and early childhood nurses; this sector requires separate attention.

The latter part of the twentieth century saw the shift in social policy to smaller, locally based community service agencies. Cuthill (2011 pp 14, 15) describes this fragmented service system of 'highly specialised and relatively autonomous' agencies as single focussed, inflexible, out of touch with emerging needs and limited in responding to complex needs – a similar critique to that of the previous system of large institutions.

So the current shift to multi-agency community service hubs appears to be an attempt to find a middle line between a system of large institutions and one of small fragmented agencies by retaining the autonomy of individual agencies while bringing them physically close to each other to support cooperation in responding to community needs². This process is broadly described as integration of services, despite contested understandings of the meaning of the term 'integration'.³

Efficient use of public funds is another key driver of integrated community services; governments recognise the need to invest in the ongoing sustainability of the community service system in tight fiscal climates and expanding urban sprawl - hubs are expected to provide lower cost solutions to government⁴.

Increasingly however, hubs are seen as a means of achieving even more ambitious goals of community building (Cuthill 2011, Rossiter 2007). So it is vitally important for those planning a community services hub to clearly identify at the earliest opportunity - who is it being established for?

Who is the Hub For?

The first question for planners to address is whether the hub is primarily to benefit the community service organisations who will deliver services in the hub. Or is this simply a means to a more ambitious purpose, to benefit people in need, for example by developing new services together beyond what the individual agencies can do alone? Or will the hub be expected to deliver an even more ambitious outcome – building community capacity?

Many hubs start with a clear focus on the first – to create efficiencies for the agencies – and with a less well articulated expectation that this hub arrangement will enable agencies to do something good together; but how this next step will occur is only sketchily understood. And in some hubs there is an intention that somehow this new arrangement of community service organisations will directly contribute to broad social change, again with little clarity about how.

This paper argues that additional resources are needed to enable a hub to support creation of new services or to build community capacity – and some of these additional resources must be identified and planned for right at the beginning, especially dedicated space for community building activities. If dedicated community building space is not provided for in the initial set up it will be difficult to add at a later stage. Just as importantly, it is vital to have the right personnel with the necessary skills and capabilities to pursue these more ambitious goals.

² See for example Department for Communities 2010 for the WA Government rationale for investing in community hubs

³ The term integration is used in the literature both as a broad concept embracing all attempts to better communicate and coordinate service delivery and as a tightly defined form of structured connection within the service system, ranging from whole of government policy through regional planning to service delivery, within an agency, within a shared hub and/or across a service system. See for example Leutz 1999, Fine et al 2005, Moore 2008

⁴ See for example Lennie (2010) for an evaluation of the Queensland Government investment in establishment of multi-agency community service hubs as part of its Strengthening Non-Government Organizations strategy with the overall goal of increasing service viability and building capacity by co-locating agencies to co-ordinate service delivery, save costs and redirect costs and time saved into service delivery

If the agencies forming a hub are unable or unwilling to contribute the human and financial resources required to step up to the more ambitious goals, then it is advisable to acknowledge at the outset that the hub intends to focus on providing benefits to the service delivery agencies and not burden it with more ambitious goals that it will struggle to deliver.

It is useful at this point to clarify the range of models that are available to those considering forming a hub before returning to the question of whose needs is the hub most intended to serve.

Models of Hubs

There is a huge diversity of arrangements that constitute multi-agency community service hubs. A consensus has emerged in the literature (eg. Fine 2005, Moore 2008, McAlpine 2014) on a continuum of integration which summarises this diversity, varying from loose networking through tighter connections and ultimately to full integration. This continuum can be summarised as:

- **Networking** – informal or structured communication between autonomous agencies to build knowledge of local services and support cross referral of clients
- **Co-location** – sharing space and back office functions; typically with a lead agency and sub-tenants
- **Cooperation** – sharing space plus small joint projects which supplement the core services provided by the agencies in the hub such as joint marketing and community engagement to build the client base of each agency;
- **Collaboration** – significant joint projects which expand the service offering, and/or provide central intake; this requires joint governance, clear leadership and investment in the capacity of agencies to work together
- **Integration** – seamless service delivery in which the client is not aware multiple agencies are involved or full amalgamation in which the agencies relinquish their individual identity and autonomy to a new entity which controls the services in the hub

Recently a further level of integration has been identified, which goes beyond integration of service delivery to integrated social infrastructure. Cuthill (2011 p.17) proposes 'a holistic approach which starts explicitly to bring together ... human services, community facilities and social networks'. So the continuum then becomes:

- Networking
- Co-location
- Cooperation
- Collaboration
- Integrated services
- Integrated social infrastructure – providing places for community members to come together for community building activities (Rossiter 2007)

Before planners can make an informed decision about which of these models will best suit their purpose it is important to be clear about what benefits stakeholders expect the proposed hub to produce.

Selecting a Hub Model

For those who are planning a multi-agency community services hub, the fundamental question is - what do we want to do together that we can't do as individual agencies?

Each agency will have its own reasons for participating in a hub. McAlpine (2014) suggests that each agency must clearly articulate its purpose for participating in a hub in addition to any joint purpose agreed among the partner agencies in order to avoid ineffective joint work.

It is valuable to understand the diversity of these reasons to ensure that they are compatible and can all be met in the one hub; and it is vital to find the common reasons so that the right model of hub is developed. Once it is clear what the common goals are in forming this hub, it will be easier to identify which model of hub is best able to deliver these outcomes.

A common driver for the formation of a community services hub is agencies looking to share space and back office functions in order to access suitable space for their individual agency, reduce costs and increase efficiency and convenience, for themselves as well as their clients. These goals can be met through a **co-location** model.

While some back office functions can be shared between agencies which are not collocated, through means such as outsourcing, when a range of services are housed in one location greater sharing can occur, such as IT infrastructure, printing and copying, shared reception; also lower rental costs per workstation can often be negotiated with a larger office.

Co-location also provides greater convenience for clients with multiple needs as a range of services can be accessed in one location. And service delivery staff sharing office and social facilities are more easily able to form the relationships necessary for effective cross referral of clients.

With some additional resources, especially staff time the co-location model is capable of evolving into a **co-operation** model to support small joint projects such as joint marketing.

However if the agencies want the hub to support creative outcomes through significant joint projects to expand the service offering then a **collaboration** model is required; and to take the next step to joint case planning for seamless, holistic service delivery, then investment in an **integrated services** model is required. A simple co-location model is not sufficient to enable collaboration or integration – significant additional resources are needed, again primarily in additional staff capacity but also in strong leadership of the significant cultural and professional changes that are essential to achieve these ambitious goals.

Finally if the planners intend that a community services hub will aim for highly ambitious social change, then the model needs to include **integrated social infrastructure**.

Table 1 lists the activities that participating agencies are likely to want to be able to do together and the reasons why agencies seek these activities. It identifies the model that is best able to deliver these outcomes.

Table 1: ACTIVITIES, OUTCOMES AND THE BEST MODEL

ACTIVITIES what do the agencies want to be able to do together?	OUTCOMES why?	HUB MODEL capable of delivering these outcomes
Communicate between agencies informally or through structured mechanisms	To increase awareness of each other's services & increase cross referral of clients	Networking
Share space & back office functions	As above plus: Access to suitable space Decreased costs Increased efficiency & convenience	Co-location

ACTIVITIES what do the agencies want to be able to do together?	OUTCOMES why?	HUB MODEL capable of delivering these outcomes
Conduct small joint projects to supplement individual agency service activities eg shared front of house (reception), joint marketing & community engagement Supported referrals	Increased profile & usage of services Increased awareness of each other's services & increase cross referral of clients Improved coordination Improved access for people with multiple needs	Co-operation
To conduct significant joint projects to expand the service offerings Eg Central client intake Joint needs analyses, advocacy & funding submissions	Single entry point to services in the hub Development of new services Joint service delivery across agencies	Collaboration
Joint case planning Joint allocation of resources to cases	Seamless, holistic service provision	Integrated Services
To provide inviting spaces & inducements to community members to use facilities to forge mutually supportive relationships Actively support resident initiatives & community leaders Develop social enterprises	Increased social capital, community capacity	Integrated social infrastructure

It may be tempting to set up a hub to deliver practical outcomes for the agencies and clients of those agencies with the assumption that it can evolve into a hub which can deliver creative or even transformative outcomes at a later stage. However creative and transformative outcomes need dedicated specialist resources which are unlikely to be part of a hub with the primary purpose of solving practical problems.

For example, decisions must be made at the design stage as to whether any space in the building will be set aside for non-income generating activities such as community engagement, community-initiated projects and/or campaigning work; if space cannot be allocated due the practical needs of the agencies in the hub then the planners need to accept that this hub will struggle to deliver social transformation.

This can precipitate an important discussion to clarify who the hub is for and so it is worthwhile at an early stage in the planning to explore the benefits to different stakeholders from this new hub arrangement, and who will benefit most.

Benefits of Community Service Hubs

The literature on the emergence of community service hubs documents a diversity of expectations of what a community service hub could potentially achieve. Some projects are quite modest in the outcomes they aim for but many are very ambitious.

To support clarity of discussions and decisions about the scope of the outcomes sought from a particular hub project it is useful to classify the outcomes of various integration projects on a continuum ranging from the practical to the transformative:

- **Practical** outcomes – such as efficiency and convenience
- **Creative** outcomes – such as new service responses developed jointly that can't be achieved by an individual agency
- **Transformational** outcomes – individuals, families and communities are connected in ways that build resilience, problem solving, economic participation and social inclusion

There are clear links between this continuum of outcomes and the continuum of integration set out in the previous section; it is useful to unpack these separately before exploring these links. It is then easier to see the logic of the approach proposed by this paper, to decide the outcomes sought before considering models.

Practical outcomes primarily benefit the service system by making its work easier and are typically achieved in a community services hub through:

- administrative and financial efficiencies from sharing facilities (rent, phone, IT, reception, photocopying etc) resulting in savings which can be redirected to expanded service delivery and/or containing growth in government expenditure on community services
- solving problems for clients (ease of access to multiple services in one location, supported 'warm' referral from a worker in one agency to a worker in another agency located in the hub)
- problem solving for service providers (ease of familiarisation with services provided by other agencies located in the same hub; informal communication across services in social settings in the hub; ease of referring clients to other services in the hub)

Creative outcomes primarily benefit clients and are pursued in community service hubs through activities that require the service system to work harder to develop and resource new service responses to benefit people in need:

- Agencies share information on unmet client needs and ideas for new service responses that are currently outside the capacity of the individual agency
- agencies in the hub are positioned to offer responses to emerging government funding opportunities that increasingly require collaboration

Transformational outcomes from community service hubs primarily benefit the broader community through social transformation (such as preventing greenfields housing estates becoming ghettos of disadvantage) by:

- providing meeting spaces to build social connectedness and social capital
- supporting emerging community leaders
- joint advocacy between residents and community service agencies in the hub to attract investment in the community

Table 2 identifies the benefits each model delivers for the community service system, for people in need and for the broader community.

Table 2: BENEFITS OF HUBS

GOALS	HUB MODEL	BENEFITS – what difference will this make?		
		FOR AGENCIES	FOR CLIENTS	FOR THE COMMUNITY
Practical	Networking	Increased capacity to deliver services Increased professional satisfaction for staff Staff retention	Services offered better match needs & aspirations Continuity of service staff	Possibly increased confidence in capacity of service system to respond when needed
	Co-location	As above plus: Increased service delivery capacity Possibly increased profile through larger venue and increased signage Easy cross referrals due to more detailed knowledge of other agencies in the hub & individual service delivery staff	As above plus: Reduced waiting times Convenient one-stop access if have multiple needs Familiar location	Greater visual awareness of service delivery site for those who pass by
	Co-operation	As above plus: Deeper knowledge of other services in the hub	As above plus: Greater awareness of the range of services in the hub More intensive support in moving between services in the hub	Possibly reduced stress & conflict in neighbourhoods because residents with complex needs can more easily access a range of services
Creative	Collaboration	As above plus: Increased range of services to meet local needs Increased capacity to respond to emerging needs	Single entry to range of services to meet a range of needs	Increased confidence that the community service system is responsive to emerging needs
	Integrated Services	Elimination of barriers to sharing of expertise, resources and organisational capacities between agencies in the hub	Seamless access to multiple services	

GOALS	HUB MODEL	BENEFITS – what difference will this make?		
		FOR AGENCIES	FOR CLIENTS	FOR THE COMMUNITY
Trans-formational	Integrated social infrastructure	Hub facilities support community development functions as well as service delivery functions of the agency	Once presenting problem is resolved, easily able to move into activities in the hub that build capability and resilience	Increased capacity for mutual support and joint problem solving

Agencies considering forming a hub may hold widely varying goals for the venture; the model agreed on should be based on the common ground and an agreed bottom line – what must the hub be able to achieve in order for all of the stakeholders to view it as successful?

And then a discussion can occur on the resources required to implement a hub model capable of delivering these outcomes so a judgement can be made on whether the benefits outweigh the costs of establishing and operating such a hub.

Costs Versus Benefits of Hubs

The literature on integration identifies a range of additional costs including financial costs, transactional costs and the costs of building relationships.

The set up phase of a community services hub incurs capital costs of establishing a suitable venue. Successful integration to achieve more ambitious creative or transformational outcomes also requires investment in strong leadership with authority to lead and the capability to build consensus, articulate a tangible vision and build the capacity of service delivery staff for joint work (Hubs Strategy Group 2007, Lennie 2010, McAlpine 2014)⁵.

Transactional costs include cost of meetings, legal agreements and managing change – staff time, purchase of external advice and the opportunity cost of redirecting management attention to joint planning. Fine et al (2005 p3) note that transaction costs may outweigh the benefits and suggests that in some circumstances alternatives to a hub may be more efficient in solving service delivery challenges. They conclude that this underlines the importance of selecting the right level of integration for each situation.

Many years ago Leutz (1999) warned that in the absence of additional resources, staff involved in integration projects will experience greater pressure, be required to undertake more complex tasks requiring training, time and effort; and there is significant potential for conflict when integration requires one agency to hold the budget.

Experience shows that significant time, sometimes years is required to plan and implement a hub, especially to build long lasting relationships (McAlpine 2014, Lennie 2010).

Table 3 identifies the additional resources required for each model of community services hub.

⁵ For example the Hubs Strategy Group concludes that it is vital to catch good leaders and never let them go; Lennie identified the loss of leadership as a significant barrier to establishment of a hub; McAlpine suggested that failure to invest in leadership is one of the classic mistakes made in collaborative ventures

TABLE 3: RESOURCES REQUIRED FOR EACH MODEL

GOALS	BEST MODEL	PHYSICAL SPACE	STAFFING	GOVERNANCE/ MANAGEMENT
Practical	CO-LOCATION And CO-OPERATION	Offices Reception Amenities, storage Service delivery spaces (eg. interview rooms, meeting/training rooms) Staff room	Service delivery staff Front of house staff Hub manager Administration	Tenancy agreements Memo of Understanding re use of shared spaces A co-ordinating committee
Creative	COLLABORATION	As above plus Space for delivery of new initiatives	As above plus Skilled and authorised leader of collaboration Agency staff with time and skills to collaborate	As above plus Joint governance of collaboration to enable collective decision making by participating agencies
Trans-formational	INTEGRATION Services and social infrastructure	Free, accessible, inviting spaces for people to meet, form relationships and take action for mutual benefit	Community Development staff Mentors for emerging community leaders	Authorisation from participating agencies for staff involved in hub governance, management and service delivery to participate in activities initiated by community members eg campaigns to influence public policy

If the hub is intended primarily to meet the practical needs of the service system (for efficiency etc) then co-location and cooperation are likely to be the best model.

However if the ultimate goal is to enable creative work by building the capacity of the agencies to better meet the needs of clients then a collaborative arrangement is required. Simply working in adjacent offices and sharing a staff room will not necessarily deliver active collaboration, especially when staff are fully engaged in delivering contract requirements for their individual service. Deliberate investments are required to enable sharing of information, exploration of new service ideas and implementation – to keep space available for growth, staff with additional skills, leadership and governance to authorise and support collaboration.

If a hub is established with a clear goal of community transformation then something more than service integration will be required. The design of the building must lend itself to the physical space required for use by local people; and the staff complement must include those with the requisite community development skills and capacity.

So planners need to be realistic about the significant additional resources required up front when the hub is being formed if it is agreed that creative and/or transformational outcomes are required.

And ultimately the cost of these resources must be weighed up against the benefits set out earlier.

Conclusion

Each step up from co-location requires increased investment of time, funds and expertise. Practical outcomes are worthwhile in their own right – it is not necessary to gild the lily by promising creative or transformative goals. Achievement of practical outcomes can be impeded if the hub is burdened with unrealistic expectations of creative or transformative outcomes without the necessary resources.

If the partner agencies want a hub that is capable of evolving to deliver creative outcomes then they need to be in a position to dedicate resources including staff with expertise in collaboration and the time and authority to act in new ways to create new services. If the partners are not able to access these resources then it is unrealistic to expect anything more ambitious than practical benefits.

Delivery of social transformation requires dedicated physical space which is not expected to generate income, is open and available for unplanned use for extended hours and is set up to support casual contact and formal meetings of people in the community. If the facilities identified for the hub cannot provide this then planning for a social transformative hub must be approached with great caution.

In order to answer the question – what model of community services hub will deliver benefits valued by the stakeholders and fit within the available resources? – it is first necessary to agree on the key planning questions:

- What are we aiming to achieve together that we can't do individually?
- Who do we want to benefit most – the agencies themselves, their clients and/or the community/society at large?
- Are we able to dedicate the resources required, collectively and as individual agencies, to develop a hub capable of delivering those benefits?

Taking the time to find agreement on these questions before settling on a hub model will help to ensure that the vision for the hub meets the aspirations of the participating agencies and that planning builds in the capacity for the next steps in pursuing the ultimate goal.

If the consensus among the participating agencies is for practical outcomes then planning can be limited to that required for successful co-location.

Many other factors will contribute to the capacity of an integration project to meet the expectations of stakeholders; further research is needed to identify hubs at each point on the continuum of integration that are seen as successful, and to identify what factors they have in common⁶.

This paper proposes that the first step in planning a multi-agency community services hub is to clarify its goals and then to identify the model of hub that best supports their achievement. Further, this paper urges the setting of realistic goals that are achievable within the resources available and warns against overloading hub models that are best suited to modest outcomes with expectations of ambitious community building outcomes.

⁶ An initial scan of the limited literature available in the public sphere which provides details of specific hub projects, combined with the author's experience of operating a new hub, suggests that success factors may include whether the hub was initiated by the people who are most likely to benefit from the model chosen, government policy which supports joint working, the level of commonality of client groups and outcomes sought by participating agencies, provision of resources to match the needs of the project and whether all partners are fully engaged in a clear, tangible, shared vision of the outcomes sought from the hub

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