Key Messages for Yorkshire and Humber Academic Health Science Network (YH AHSN):

Recommendations from regional innovations in health, research and education

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Introduction

The following document summarises learning acquired from developmental evaluations of the NIHR CLAHRC for South Yorkshire and the Yorkshire and Humber HIEC.

These are both 'networks' or networked collaborations that aim to address the research- innovation-practice gap. As such, lessons learned may well to transferable to Academic Health Science Networks (AHSN), which have similar structures and functions

Findings, implications and possible solutions are identified which are likely to be of particular relevance for the set-up and on-going development of the Yorkshire and Humber AHSN.

Main Benefits of networked organisations

Whilst the collaborative health innovation landscape is populated with various organisational models, the priorities of the AHSNs mean that they will have certain elements in common with other initiatives: in particular the CLAHRCs and HIECs which precede them. The literature indicates that they have similarities to network weaving organisations, for instance they promote shared values and facilitate communication and collaboration (Read et al, CARN/IPDC conference 2012). **There are two main benefits** of these types of 'network weaving' organisations.

Firstly, they can offer unique infrastructure and support for programmes and projects, which is not available elsewhere. The profile/marketing of AHSNs, strategic level 'buy-in' of partner organisations, access to commissioners, and problem solving processes and governance structures for multi-disciplinary, cross-organisational research, implementation and education are some specific areas of added value.

The **second main benefit is the ability to promote learning** within the organisation by **creating a coherent and collaborative culture with shared priorities and goals, rather than a collection of disconnected projects**. They can therefore become more than the sum of parts

The authors therefore recommend that **organisational development is a priority for the YH AHSN**, and that this development should be **informed by long-term internal evaluation** focused on the key processes and mechanisms of the organisation and how the (evolving) context influences specific outcome patterns. An evaluation team working closely with programme management best achieves the rapid feedback of findings in formats that are appropriate to inform change.

Learning points from evaluations

Essentials of Governance & Communication

What works?	What are difficulties experienced?	Possible solutions
Coherent corporate image encourages engagement and promotes spread.	**Attribution of activities and outputs** in a multi-organisational network can be problematic.	**Straightforward guidelines** on corporate image and attribution of effort (e.g. CLAHRc SY).
Structured processes for communicating **learning throughout the organisation** (up, down, and across).	**Lack of perceived value of the network as a whole.**	**Internal self-promotion** regarding the importance and benefits of core functions and inter-organisational learning.
Practitioners directly involved in implementation projects generally **have good knowledge of these projects**.	Front-line **knowledge of** innovation **programmes can be difficult to achieve.**	**Projects can act as channels for** easily digestible **programme information** (e.g. postcards with web-links, training opportunities, seminars etc).
Easily identifiable themes with key contacts.	Organisational growth, complex programmes and fitting with external priorities can create **complex structures**, which **are difficult to market**.	**Skilled communications experts** are crucial requirements**. How the programme can be marketed should be a key consideration.**

Appropriate Priority-Setting & Decision-Making

What works?	What are difficulties experienced?	Possible solutions
Collaborative priority setting across organisations and disciplines.	**Set-up,** and outcomes expected to happen, **too quickly**.	**Planned approach to collaborative programme development** with time for collaborations to achieve joint-working. Twin track approaches: **quick wins and true priority setting**, with a clear plan about doing this
Flexible priority setting.	**Maintaining focus and ensuring appropriate stakeholders have influence.**	<u>**Simple, unambiguous and well communicated organisational priorities**</u> (e.g. CLAHRC SY, '3 pillars').
Distributed, autonomous leadership, with clear reporting structures developed within the network.	**Maintaining coherence without tight control.**	**Regular review of project priorities and goals.**
Priorities based on **local needs and circumstances**, supported by flexible and responsive resource.	**Difficulties with implementation-fidelity and scalable interventions.** **Changing context means changing local needs.**	**Access to implementation expertise. Flexibility and autonomous leadership. Some flexibility of access to resources.**

Achieving Adoption & Spread

What works?	What are difficulties experienced?	Possible solutions
Ownership: a sense of ownership created by local development **helps adoption**.	**Ownership** by another Trust/University etc. **can be a barrier to spread**.	Multiple, **networked 'hot-spots'** for local development and shared learning. **Clarify what aspects** of an implementation **are transferable.**
Integration with existing working practices.	Implementation fidelity: integrating adoption and spread with local practices can lead to **drifting aims and priorities**.	**Clarify what aspects** of an implementation **are transferable** and what aspects need adapting for the local context.
Ability to be flexible and change in light of **local knowledge**.	Local knowledge is key for successful implementation, but **engagement of appropriate individuals can be challenging** and time consuming.	Enrolment of enthusiastic and appropriately employed **project 'champions'** (e.g. YH HIEC) at implementation sites, with definite roles, job plans and ring-fenced time. Note that this is not a 'cheap fix'; it requires significant resources to identify individuals and maintain engagement.

Effective Collaboration & Co-production

What works?	What are difficulties experienced?	Possible solutions
Organisational 'buy-in' at a strategic level, **improves access** opportunities.	High level sponsorship **does not necessarily equate to practical assistance or support** at ground-level.	Ensure that the **importance of 'buy-in'** to the programme is communicated, with incentives, **at all levels** of organisations.
Developing **practical solutions for** working-around **organisational incompatibilities**.	**Human resources and finance practices and procedures** can be a source of enduring problems.	**Cross-organisational working groups** particularly to agree on solutions for recurring issues. **Developing a shared resource around problem solving.**
Sharing of expertise across the organisation.	**Capacity issues** can limit the extent of these collaborations. **Mutual benefits** for people with expertise that is in demand **might not occur naturally**.	**Core functions** can **support capacity building** and provide **incentives and resources to promote internal collaborative relationships**.
Developing boundary-spanner roles and **promoting inter-organisational understanding.**	**Numerous organisational barriers** exist to formalising these processes.	**Joint appointments, secondments, studentships and bursaries, placements, fellowships, match funding, and joint learning events.**

Getting Capacity Right

What works?	What are difficulties experienced?	Possible solutions
Having **flexible staffing resources** within the organisation network to respond to increased demand.	Often **individuals have little or no spare capacity** to invest. **Demand can be unpredictable**.	**Matched funding** can help to free-up and prioritise time. **Engage with middle-managers** to negotiate priorities and practicalities.
Capacity building agenda that is **specific to the priorities** of the programme.	**Turbulence and financial pressures** (particularly in the NHS).	Masters student **placements, secondments, studentships, bespoke training**/workshops available to partner organisations etc. Pool resources and thinking through solutions.
Having **adequate presence and profile** to influence and change culture **across a large geographical area** and **promoting local capacity building**.	Increasing capacity can be **more difficult in areas not traditionally** seen as **sites for innovation. Communication** for learning and co-production **is difficult when locations are widespread.**	Infrastructure and support can **compensate for the challenges of covering a large region** to an extent by **promoting a culture of self-support and joint learning**, helping with **travel costs** and emphasising the **value of learning from others**. Providing case studies to support time investment.

Promoting Sustainability & Growth

What works?	What issues remain?	Possible solutions
Promoting reflective practice to increase capacity for adoption and spread activities in partner organisations.	Often **limited capability to change and promote reflective practice** in organisations.	Structured education and **focus on reflective practice being an element of projects. Matched funding. Champions with a role in promoting reflective practice**.
Criteria and measures of success for the organisation as a whole, not just individual projects.	Tensions between *programme* development and delivering *project* outcomes.	**Embedding developmental evaluation processes into the core programme** to understand tensions and help achieve sustainability.
Having influence on commissioning/ decommissioning processes.	**Engaging with appropriate people in commissioning roles can be problematic** particularly at a project level.	**Core function** of the organisation to assist with **engaging appropriate commissioners**.

Summary

How the programme can be marketed and how it will be perceived both externally and internally are key considerations. Effective communication channels are also of prime importance, and skilled communications experts are therefore essential. A coherent corporate image should be developed with minimal consultation and clear, straightforward guidelines.

A planned approach to collaborative programme development takes time to embed and is assisted by 1) flexibility of secure funding with 2) distributed, autonomous leadership reinforced by 3) simple, unambiguous and well-communicated organisational priorities. These principles also help to base priorities on changing local needs and circumstances.

A sense of ownership of interventions (through local development) can assist adoption, but be a barrier to spread. Integration with local practices can lead to drifting aims and priorities and loss of intervention-fidelity. For these reasons it is important to clarify what aspects of an implementation are transferable and what aspects need adapting for the local context. It should be noted that raising a project's profile and engaging practitioners in collaborative working could require significant effort and investment.

Buy-in at all levels of partner organisations is required and where possible, this should be linked to practical support. The programme has a core function to help solve issues of cross-organisational incompatibility and to promote inter-programme learning and support. This is of particular concern as the geographical boundaries of the AHSNs are large. Capacity-building and boundary spanning for the specific needs of the programme should be a key concern.

Sustainability will be achieved by changing culture in partner organisations to create dialogue between researchers, practitioners and educationalists. Sustainability will also depend on the programme 1) developing reflexively, 2) learning-by-doing, and 3) addressing the needs of all key stakeholders. This will require a core function of organisational evaluation to inform developments, recognise successes and help to address opportunities and plan for the future.

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