Your anchor network journey

A practical guide to getting started

Anchor networks bring together a range of anchor organisations either at a place based level, or across a sector in order to learn from each other and take action to further their anchor mission. There are a growing number of anchor networks in the UK, across many cities and regions, and within sectors as diverse as health and higher education.

This learning product was created following HALN's event in October 2023 (catch up here) on Anchor networks and covers the rationale behind setting up a network, the different options to consider, critical success factors, some suggested first steps and a list of further resources.

It builds on the LAIN How to Guide which sets out some of the key building blocks for creating new local anchor networks.

www.haln.org.uk

Health Anchors Learning Network

? Why establish a network?

Networks have a variety of benefits, but they do require resources and commitment to maintain so it's important to be clear on why you need a network for your anchor work.

Some of the main drivers behind establishing a network are:

- Bringing together partners who have a shared geographical place and community, or who work across the same sector and want to share learning.

- Tackling shared challenges, for example working towards Net Zero or improving workforce recruitment.

- Collaborating to benefit partners and suppliers. For example, having shared approaches to social value, or jointly investing in new infrastructure.

- Realising the benefits of peer learning and continuous improvement.

London

The London Anchor Institutions Network (LAIN) brings together some of London's biggest anchor institutions supported by the Mayor of London to help tackle inequalities and the growing climate emergency. It includes universities, utilities, transport, the NHS and others using their procurement, estates management and workforce strategies to create a fairer, greener and more prosperous city.

The network was established in March 2021 to support London's recovery from the pandemic. LAIN has evolved and it is now about London's longer term resilience and how the partners can work together to support that. LAIN reports to the London Partnership Board and the most immediate governance tier is a steering committee co-chaired by the Vice Chancellor of the University of London and the Executive Director of Performance for the NHS in London.

All members are represented either directly or indirectly on that steering committee which directs what the network focuses on. There are then a range of working groups, some of which are chaired by the network members.

The network is supported by a small team at City Hall. There are a number of focus areas, e.g. inclusive growth through more local SME procurement, or accelerating London's drive to Net Zero, and exploring how to tackle the barriers that childcare presents to participation in the labour market. Their areas of focus have come out of the data they have collected and member priorities.

Options to consider

There are different types of anchor networks and a range of options to consider when setting one up. Here we set out some of the main choices you may want to make when refining the purpose and function of your network.

- Spatial or thematic: will your anchor network bring together partners who are geographically coexistent (e.g. all within the same City or borough?), or will you convene around themes (e.g. health and wellbeing) or sectors (e.g. higher education, or housing)?

- Functions, objectives or programmes: will your anchor network be organised around functions (e.g. convening people across different anchor organisations who work in procurement teams, HR / workforce roles, estates teams, etc.), by objectives (for example, tackling specific health inequalities, or reducing youth unemployment) or by programmes (e.g. be delivering a specific project or programme of work together)? In some cases, anchor networks may start by focusing on one of these (e.g. organising around functions) and then identify shared programmes which they may take forward once relationships are formed and some shared priorities have been identified.

- Formal or informal: will your anchor network have any formally agreed objectives or memorandums of understanding, or will it be a more informal space based on peer learning and networking?

- Statutory sector, or cross sector: for those anchor networks which are place based in a city or region there is often a decision to make about the membership of the network. Will it be focused mainly on statutory sector organisations, such as the Local Authority and NHS Trusts, or will it include anchors in other sectors, such as housing associations, museums, police and colleges? As the Leeds network has shown (see case study 3) some anchor networks are beginning to work more closely with businesses in their area too.

CASE STUDY 2

Birmingham

The Birmingham Anchor network is supported by CLES (Centre for Local Economic Strategies). It has six members across the NHS, Universities and Housing Associations. It launched in 2019 and the network signed an MOU in 2023.

The network wanted to get to grips with how they could work together before committing to a full partnership, and they have now committed to a further 10 years, which is the length of time they feel it will take to progress against their aims.

There is a vast difference in scale across the network and that range works really well. The governance structure has a leadership group, a coordination group and working groups which are thematic. A full time coordinator supports the work and this post is joint funded by the network partners. They have learnt by doing, starting small and then spreading practice across the network. They have had great success with the network's employment working group e.g. launching the I-CAN project has helped over 450 unemployed Birmingham residents into NHS jobs from some of the most disadvantaged communities in Birmingham.

Critical success factors

There were several critical success factors identified at the
HALN Anchor Networks event:

- Co-ownership of the network from different partners: a network might be initiated by one anchor organisation, but in order for the network to be effective it is important that partners co-chair working groups or steering committees, and commit to securing resource and buy in from their organisations.

- Storytelling: successful anchor networks have a strong story to tell about why they are working together, and their core purpose as a network. The London Anchor Institutions Network (LAIN) reflected on the positive impact of their investment in communications about their work, including short videos about the benefits of their work to Londoners.

- Identifying key objectives and gathering data on these: many anchor networks have a shared set of priorities and objectives that unite them and guide their work. They also gather data on these, commonly once or twice a year, and use this to reflect on their progress and update their objectives. Some anchors have also found anchor self reflection tools helpful as a way of identifying areas where they may want to focus their energy, or are using the UCLP measurement toolkit to focus their data collection.

- Encouraging healthy competition! One of the benefits of anchor networks is the inspiration and challenge it brings. Some of the anchor networks at the HALN event spoke about the benefits of being part of a peer group that encouraged some light competition and a desire to "keep up with the pack".

- Be clear about the business case: how does being part of an anchor network help organisations address their major challenges and strategies? Is it helping them deliver on their strategic goals, such as their plans for a more inclusive economy, or reaching Net Zero targets? Explicitly articulating the purpose of the network will help keep you on track, and keep members engaged.

First steps

Here are some of the first steps you can take if you are considering developing an anchor network in your setting or sector:

- What conversations are already happening among anchors in your area? Are some of the major anchor institutions already engaged in collaborative structures? How strong are the existing relationships between anchor leaders? Where is joint work already happening? What shared problems and challenges do you have? These questions may help you work out your starting points for an anchor network, and what might motivate and engage anchor partners to collaborate.

- Self reflection tool: consider using one of the anchor self reflection tools with partners to assess areas of strength and areas where you might want to pay attention to. These anchor reflection tools can help map your progress against key anchor levers, such as procurement, workforce, estates, and so on.

- Senior leadership: which senior leaders are engaged in the objectives of your anchor work, and keen to support and sponsor the work? Identifying key leaders at executive - and sometimes non executive level - is a crucial early step to secure resourcing and organisational buy-in for the work.

> "Go with the energy - find something you can work on together where you can move the dial quickly"
>
> ANCHOR LEADER AT THE HALN NETWORKS EVENT

Other resources you might find helpful:
How to Build a Local Anchor Network (London Anchor Institutions' Network)
Checklist for Initiating Anchor Action (Health Anchors Learning Network)
Tools to support anchor practice (Health Anchors Learning Network)
Business Anchors Progression Framework (Leeds)

Case study 3

Leeds

The Leeds Anchor Network was established in 2018 and is Chaired by the Vice Chancellor of Leeds Beckett University and facilitated by Leeds City Council. The network has 14 members including Universities, FE Colleges, major NHS organisations, the Council, and regional utility firms, among others.

The network is united by delivering the Leeds Best City Ambition with an overarching aim to tackle poverty and inequality and three underlying pillars of working towards zero carbon, improving health and wellbeing and tackling health inequalities, and delivering inclusive economic growth. Together the network employs over 59,000 people, including nearly 2,000 apprentices. They spent over £720 million in the Leeds economy in 2020/21.

The Network is governed by an anchor executive leadership group attended by senior leaders from each anchor partner. There are also four sub groups working across Employment, Procurement, Climate and Communications which have specialist expertise from each partner represented. Each partner organisation commits to completing an anchor progression framework and providing metrics and data collated on an annual basis. There is a commitment from a senior level to self reflect and progress on areas within the framework.

The network also has a shared business plan which covers areas where the partners work together in the city. Leeds has recently expanded its anchor approach by launching the Leeds Business Anchor Network to support large private sector businesses to embed anchor ways of working. This launched in September 2023 with an initial nine large businesses committed to increasing their collective contribution to the city.

Through the Economies for Healthier Lives programme, Leeds received funding from The Health Foundation for a project to improve health inequalities through a joined-up, targeted approach to economic and health interventions in the most disadvantaged communities.