COMMUNITY HUBS IN HALTON

The Premier's Advisory Group on Community Hubs published their report Community Hubs in Ontario: A Strategic Framework and Action Plan[1] in August 2015. Although community hubs have been around for decades, momentum surrounding hubs has increased due to Premier Wynne's interest. Given the importance of the subject, with funding support from Social and Community Services of the Regional Municipality of Halton, Community Development Halton (CDH) embarked on building a broad-based conversation on community hubs. A recently released background document, Community Hubs in Halton, provides the basis of a full discussion on hubs. This Community Dispatch captures some of the important understandings outlined in the document.

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Introduction

Community hubs are an alternative approach to delivering services in a holistic manner guided by the principles of community involvement and partnership. Important questions need to be answered such as:

- How exactly do we define a community hub?
- What is the purpose of a community hub?
- Who is better off because of community hubs?

The background document, *Community Hubs in Halton*, speaks to an understanding and development of hubs within the Halton context. It explores different models of hubs, their characteristics, their role in community, their strengths and weaknesses in supporting planning, service delivery and community infrastructure and, importantly, community well-being. It also reviews experiences in hub development in countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia.

CDH engaged with community agencies, grassroots community-based organizations, and selected community members across Halton's municipalities, exploring the multiple definitions or understandings of 'hubs' and their role in the development of community well-being in Halton. These discussions also assessed the readiness of community to embrace hubs as a model of collaboration and integrated service delivery at the local level, as well as the barriers to hub development in Halton.

Background on Hubs

Community hubs are believed to assist in building cohesive and more resilient communities. In fact, community hubs have the power to bring community members together, assisting them to form new relationships and support networks that did not previously exist. This is facilitated through community-based activities that bring people together and by the fact that community hubs are community-led. Community hubs also hold out the prospect of providing more effective services, since they can be shaped to be responsive to the needs of people in the communities in which they are located, as well as being more easily accessible.

Limitations of and Barriers to Implementing Hubs

Three areas that challenge hub development are:

- Time for planning
- Integrated service delivery
- Community infrastructure and public property

The Australian Hubs Strategy Group has identified additional barriers that can impede the creation of a community hub:

- Unable to initiate planning processes;
- Challenges with staffing
- Collaborating to create a joint vision;
- Managing multiple partnerships;
- Managing community expectations once a community hub is established/built;
- Finding a fit between existing organizations that have their own way of operating;
- Scepticism;
- Potential segmentation of roles internally and externally; and
- Dealing with change.

(Hubs Strategy Group, 2007, 23-24)[2]

Defining a Community Hub

There is no generally accepted definition of a community hub as it is a term that is driven locally and varies in meaning depending on its context. One definition that has resonance is as follows:

> A community hub is a conveniently located place that is recognised and valued in the local community as a gathering place for people and an access point for a wide range of community activities, programs, services and events.
>
> Rossiter 2007[3]

Community hubs do not just provide services for the community, but are orchestrated and driven by the community as well. A community hub can also act as a gathering place for local community members to come together to meet, collaborate, and build relationships with each other. Some even identify community hubs as a central meeting point that allows for communities to live, build social capital, and grow. In brief, a community hub is the concentration of various activities and services that are not only accessible to all within the same proximity, but serve the needs of all community members.

Purpose of a Community Hub

A community hub consists of publicly accessible services, spaces, resources, and activities that respond to the ever-changing needs of a community over time. These services are reflective of the community's self-identified needs and are co-located, integrated, and delivered by the community under nonprofit community-based governance. A review of the literature indicates that community hubs have three primary purposes: community building, service coordination and delivery, and placemaking.

Community Participation and Engagement

The 'elephant' in the discussion about community hubs is the need to understand the dynamics and meanings associated with the word 'community.' Concepts such as community engagement, community participation and empowerment are rarely defined. What meanings are attributed to these words and how will they influence hub development?

The Halton Perspective

Over the last year, CDH has been engaging leaders from the health, education, and social services sectors in conversations about collaborative work and community hubs. Through these conversations, it has become evident that there is a strong desire to work together, that community hubs are about

bringing together community partners who can create synergy and that collaboration and coordination is more important than integration.

As people discussed community hubs and their place in Halton, the language that wove through the conversations contained words such as network weaver, collaboration, partnership, gathering, democratic public space, quality of life, social inclusion, social capital, and synergy. These terms are helpful in framing the emerging conversation on hubs.

Based on the discussions, common themes appeared: that hubs could be those places that provide services to people of all ages and stages of life, that hubs support intergenerational opportunities, that hubs decrease stigma as people from all walks of life interact with each other. There needs to be a holistic approach for community hubs to thrive and hub development requires time, focus, resources, and staffing for community planning. Finally, there was a desire expressed around the creation of a meeting point or roundtable to initiate dialogue among all community actors who are integral to hub development.

The conversations highlighted the following areas that need definition and support. They are:
- Leadership
- Financing
- Neighbourhood hubs
- Shared spaces in usable spaces
- Limits to space
- Shared resources, shared program beyond co-location
- Hubs as connectors
- Hubs as knowledge exchange, shared learning
- Processes
- Common identified issues

Future Planning: A Journey into Hub Development in Halton

The document turns to how planning processes may be created in Halton that are holistic and recognize the continuum of hubs and the important contribution of each not only to the health and well-being of individuals and families but also, importantly, to a socially cohesive and inclusive Halton.

Activities that are considered necessary to the fulfillment of the steps to the development of hubs are suggested below. They are:

- understand local needs and demands of community
- establish a clear vision and mission with the community
- collaborate, develop partnerships, and build relationships
- develop strategic objectives
- develop a 'business' [planning pathway] model for hub development
- secure support and resources
- acquire assets
- establish an appropriate governance structure
- implementation and sustain operations
  (My Community 2016, 34; Mulligan 2010, 61)[4,5]

Future Planning Framework: A Suggestion

As CDH engaged leaders in the human services sector in conversations about collaborative work associated with hub development, it was important to recognize that in Halton there are existing and thriving collaborative initiatives and emerging opportunities. However, there is no overarching planning framework for these developments at the local or regional level but rather, as the Special Advisor noted, multiple planning tables usually organized by field of service (Pitre, 2015). At the same time, there is

no interest in a highly controlling and directing planning body for collaborative or community hub development. Planning and development in this area must be a cooperative undertaking for success.

How then to create a local or regional planning framework for community hub development? Perhaps, adapting the "constellation model" proposed by Tonya and Mark Surman (2008) offers some promise.[6] The constellation model refers to a collection of community partners (stewards) committed to a shared purpose that intentionally provides the space and support for smaller groups among their number to self-organize around specific initiatives that are consistent with and reflect the larger shared purpose. The overarching stewardship structure is not highly directive, but provides lightweight governance or oversight to the development of the overall shared concept or purpose. Partners organize themselves into "action-focused work teams" to achieve specific objectives, driven by their own energy and commitment to the task.

How could this approach be adapted to the issue of community hub, or collaborative services in Halton? In this case, the magnetic attractor is the opportunity presented by the provincial government's interest in and support for community hub development, consistent with the interest and actions of the community and service sector (civic, health, education, and social service organizations). The "shared vision" is to promote and support connected, coordinated service delivery to people and communities, recognizing that this will be most effectively done through partnerships and collaborations rather than highly centralized corporate models. This is particularly true when the hub development is responding to service and social development initiatives at the smaller geographies (neighbourhood) of community. Since there are a variety of different areas

involved, marked by distinct organizational cultures and experiences, what is required are "lightweight agreements" to explore hub development in self-selected areas from which all contributing partners ("stewards") can learn and benefit.

A hub or community hub planning framework for Halton might be pictured as shown on the next page. Organizations and agencies active or interested in hub development come around a table under an agreement to learn together and support each other in hub development and collaborative work. They may commit to hold educational and shared learning sessions from each other's work, meeting perhaps three to four times a year. Among these "stewards" of community development there will already be some that are partnering in collaborations that may be well developed and that may be able to offer support and guidance to others at earlier stages of development. Others will be organized and evolving and still others just in the formative or emergent stage. Again, participants self-select into these circles of activity. The benefit of creating a space for this range of activity and a table convened regularly to stay connected in common purpose is shared learning, mutual support, and awareness of collaborative activity throughout the region.

As described in the Surman's paper, it is recommended that an intermediary body not directly involved in any area of direct service would serve as a secretariat to convene the Regional Community Hub Action Network and keep track of and provide updates on hub developments.

Community hub constellations at different stages of development

Emerging

Evolving

Maturing

Regional Community Hub Action Network
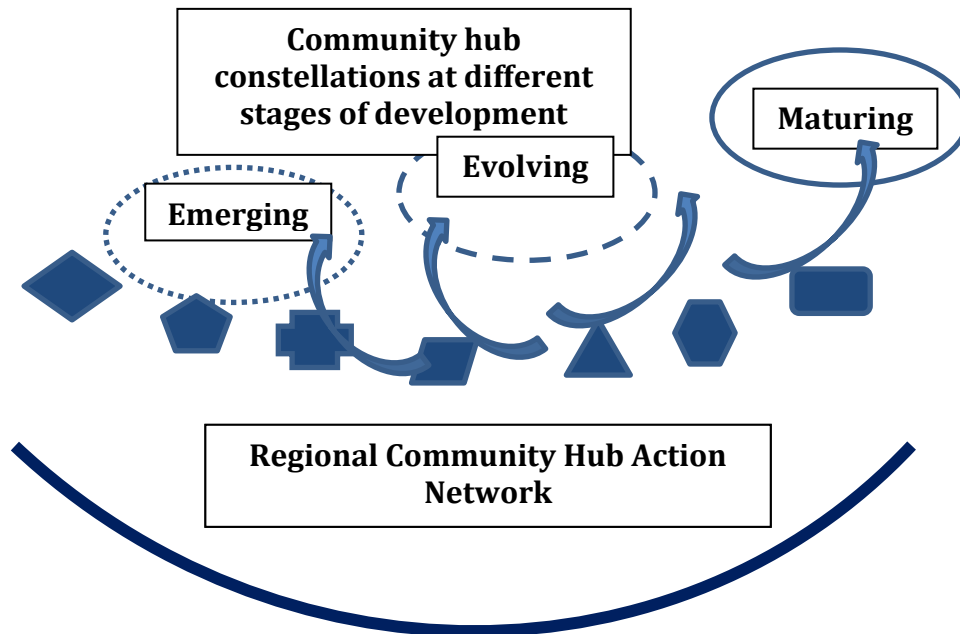
Conclusion

This report establishes that there is not just one universal type of community hub; rather each community hub can be conceptualized, defined, and developed in numerous different ways depending on the needs of the community it serves. A community hub is not only unique, but contains specific resources, programs and a wide variety of social and health services that assists in implementing local and community-based solutions and supports.

The development of a successful and fully integrated community hub requires working at a community level and working *with* community members and forming local partnerships; a top-down approach cannot be employed. Rather, it is immensely important for the province, as well as local municipalities, to partake in a collaborative approach in the development of a community hub.

A community driven, collaborative, neighbourhood-based approach between government agencies and communities must also be implemented to adequately address the many challenges communities may encounter in the development of a community hub. Community hubs have the power to not only be a solution to ensure that a community's needs are being met, but also to involve and empower residents, to increase social capital, and to build inclusive and cohesive communities.

The full document, *Community Hubs in Halton*, can be found on Community Development Halton's website at http://www.cdhalton.ca.

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[2] Hubs Strategy Group. "Setting the hubs humming: Working together for children and their families." Australia, 2007.
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[6] Tonya Surman and Mark Surman (2008). Listening to the stars: the constellation model of collaborative social change.
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