

Supporting a Stronger Civil Society

Consultation on improving support for civil society organisations

Response

With thanks to members of the South London CVS Partnership for their input.

Introduction

The South London CVS Partnership exists to support its members to do their jobs better, both at a strategic and local level. We have worked in partnership for the past 10 years to ensure effective representation of the voluntary and community sector at a sub regional and regional level and promote the corporate interests of our Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) members.

Collectively we represent the interests of some 4,000 mainly small and medium sized voluntary and community organisations that between them employ 20,000+ paid staff and provide a wide range of services to those living and working in south London.

Question 1: How can online services for frontline groups be improved?

Careful consideration is needed of which services are suited to online provision and at what level. Online services are a significant contribution to the support for frontline groups but cannot replace the provision of locally sourced support and the constructive dialogue that this generates. This also would reflect the coalition government's commitment to localism and the variables that this generates. Merton Voluntary Service Council runs www.mertonconnected.org.uk which is an excellent example of a locally developed website which pools relevant information to support groups on a day to day basis. In 2010 Merton Connected received 25,867 absolute unique visitors generating 253,627 page views which demonstrates the value that the community places on this locally provided information.

Online services have great potential but cannot be seen as a cheap/easy option – they must be carefully designed and developed, and kept up to date, or they will be cumbersome and labour intensive. Online services are often most used by development workers, whose expertise means they can signpost groups to a website that will be of specific use to them. For most groups there is no substitute for in-person advice and support - often groups need more than a website or a toolkit which cannot 'dig deeper' beyond the organisation's presenting issue: they require more in-depth support which they may not be aware of. Indeed the greater availability of online resources means that CVSs deal with fewer simpler requests (information being available online) and dealing with more complex requests needing face to face discussion.

Many small organisations making a vital contribution to local communities, geographic and of specific interest groups, have limited, or even no, access the internet. There are literacy and language issues that are usually addressed appropriately at a local level. Web accessibility issues will disadvantage some groups as services move online which includes barriers of literacy, language skills, and disability. Investment in support is needed to address these accessibility issues. Our experience in South London is still of small groups struggling to access the Internet over Dial up, or if already switched to broadband, paying more than they need to. Many small and grass roots groups are really only using the Internet for basic

functions such as email – there needs to be awareness raising / support / mentoring / training concerning a wide range of issues relating to computer and Internet use for all groups to equally access and benefit from such online resources. Skills in social media are needed in particular. In our opinion, IT support & development projects like Superhighways (<http://www.superhighways.org.uk>) will be crucial, along with development workers, to mediate access to online resources.

Question 2: What can Government do to forge more effective links and transfer skills between small civil society organisations and businesses or larger charities?

There is already an effective local sharing of information and skills between voluntary and community groups, usually facilitated by the CVS through networks, fora and other interest groupings. However, there could be further provision of resources for local or sub-regional promotion and brokerage of mentoring, shadowing and local skills and information sharing.

Ideally this activity would be free of cost for the participants – to reduce barriers to participation and maximise benefits of many groups being involved. The Government has a role in providing resource to develop, broker, pilot, promote, and manage these opportunities and infrastructure bodies are well placed to deliver this support.

It should be noted that larger charities are themselves facing cuts and may struggle to spare the resources necessary. Business will need engagement and prompting to get involved – probably tax breaks or other financial incentives. Need a mechanisms like endowment funds etc to overcome business resistance to ‘unpopular’ causes – such as Rape Crisis and refugee groups, etc - this can be a barrier.

Government also needs to develop its messages to private sector and set expectations of their role in Big/Civil Society –to take a lead in bringing about culture change within business. This message of private sector culture change needs to be consistent at all levels of government – national, London, local.

It is easy to overestimate the extent to which businesses can transform the sector. In fact, it is quite a narrow skills crossover – mainly in generic business areas like finance, investment, communications, etc. Remember too that VCS has much to teach the corporate sectors, too – especially around understanding public policy, addressing equalities issues, community engagement, effective networking, etc.

Question 3: How could brokerage of pro bono support be improved?

The brokerage itself will need resources and to be professionally managed– either funding or the pro bono donation of staff to undertake brokerage. Voluntary organisations will need support to engage with employers and to identify roles that would be suitable for pro bono work. Employers will need support to understand how they can work with voluntary organisations. Issues such as liability and duty of care need to be considered.

It is also important that in developing pro bono brokerage that this works with existing structures – CVSs, Volunteer centres, business link and the many professional pro bono brokerage agencies – and potentially to allocate discrete funding to them rather than create a formal brokerage structure.

It should be noted that pro bono support does not need to be skills based – venue hire, sponsorship, etc also useful and the public sector should not be forgotten. Public bodies could take a lead in offering pro bono support. The government could also provide the input to analyse and prioritise the areas of need for free services to focus any national campaign.

An existing national voluntary organisation could be funded to develop a single web-portal to improve access to this information. NAVCA would link well with the CVS network which often acts as a signpost for front line organisations.

The needs of minority and ethnic groups need to be acknowledged and included.

Question 4: What support might your organisation need to become more resilient?

The text in the consultation is contradictory – it talks of becoming less dependent on state funding yet wanting more civil society organisation to run public services. It must be remembered that organisations exist to deliver their objects they don't exist to deliver public sector contracts. We believe the government should bear in mind that the majority of small groups will never get near a public sector contract, and this is not part of their mission.

Many small groups need support to improve their governance structures, to ensure they do not overstretch themselves, help setting up a constitution, getting finances in order etc – that will make them more resilient. This kind of support needs to be local - it will look different in different places, and needs friendly knowledgeable local development workers.

Unstable funding is a big barrier to resilience for frontline groups. Relaxing funding rules to allow groups to carry forward under spends would be very helpful as would training on fundraising, consortia working and subcontracting. Universally in the voluntary and community sector stability of funding is a key issue. Wherever possible a minimum of 3 years funding needs to be applied. Tendering and retendering periods need to be realistic and, in the latter case, provide time for effective action in response to cessation of funding. This should be implicit in the Compact but experience is other.

The Big Society Bank could have a role in supporting groups through the transition to new environment, but its services need to be genuinely tailored to needs of sector, i.e. not simply provide similar 'charity' services to those of commercial banking sector which are in fact rarely used by voluntary and community sector.

Question 5: What do you think should be the priorities for a bursary fund?

Priorities and eligibility need to be set locally, drawing on local intelligence. Small groups need development packages that are resilient, with long term funding . The focus should be work with disadvantaged communities to overcome problems on their own terms not to externally set criteria. The priority should be assisting those groups able to demonstrate they can deliver change, based on potential not track record.

Question 6: How could any bursary fund be delivered simply and fairly?

The priorities for the bursary schemes need to be set locally as do the criteria for applications. It should focus on delivering outcomes to most disadvantaged areas and groups to generate equitable outcomes. They would be best administered locally by

infrastructure bodies (and possibly jointly with local authorities) who know the needs of groups – perhaps managed jointly with local authorities. There will need to be sufficient resources for administration as it is likely to see high levels of applications, possibly far exceeding funds available. There may well be existing local small grant schemes to which the bursary fund could be attached, such as the Community Fund (up to £2k) administered by Sutton CVS on behalf of the local authority.

Question 7: How could consolidation grants help ensure the sustainability and efficiency of infrastructure services?

We support the notion that substantial collaboration can help to ensure the sustainability and efficiency of infrastructure services. South London CVS Partnership have been funded through the Big Lottery since mid-2009 to explore the current arrangements and future options for the delivery of back office functions of the members of the Partnership and frontline organisations across the sub-region. From the research conducted to date it is clear that efficiencies can be (and are) being made which will result in more effective frontline delivery.

However, we continue to work under the principle of ‘strategic but local’ recognising the benefits of representation at a strategic level, while retaining the local identity and service delivery through the borough based CVS to meet the diverse needs of the local communities and meet the requirements of the localism agenda. In our case as with many others the sharing of back office functions is a much more appropriate form of consolidation than merger. Any grants could be targeted at organisations that are duplicating the same service locally and encourage them to collaborate.

Decision making must be led by the trustee board. They must be mindful of their duty to ensure that the resources of the organisation are used effectively to achieve their purpose, which includes a consideration of merger. However, government must be wary of appearing to impose merger on organisations. This would undermine the independence of the sector (and therefore the trust of the public) and the concept of trusteeship itself. Therefore, some capacity building for governance might be required as trustees to ensure trustees are fully engaged with any partnership processes.

Question 8: Are there ways that expert intervention can support areas which are lacking social capital to improve local relationships and develop a stronger civil society?

With the Big Society initiative there is huge opportunity to build social capital within marginalised and hard to reach communities. This will need resourcing and the effects of the public spending cuts on the disadvantaged must be mitigated.

Social capital cannot be built without effective local public sector and voluntary and community sector partnership. The removal of the compunction for this has to be addressed in some way that forces or encourages reluctant parties to engage. Local infrastructure organisations will play a vital role and Community Organisers will need to be working closely with them. In Kingston for example, the local infrastructure organisation provides a good link between local people, community organisations and local services through the LSP. This provides an opportunity for community development, supporting and engaging local people to identify what are their needs and empowering them to take action. They could be

supported by partner agencies by mentoring or targeting resources working with infrastructure organisations to encourage local people themselves to become experts in their own field.

Recent public spending cuts are going to have a huge impact on social capital, as they will affect the most disadvantaged most. In London, the local authorities facing the biggest government cuts cover the areas of most deprivation.

Development of social capital takes time especially on the estates and boroughs of London which are most disadvantaged and marginalized. For example, The Fairshare Trust was a ten-year programme addressing this and results are only just being seen eight years into the project.

Networking and community development provided by local VCS, and supported by infrastructure support services is critical to improving social capital. Local VCS activity helps deliver social cohesion through meaningful activity. This can be built on by CVS being resourced to do outreach to support more groups

It will be difficult for a single community organiser to develop the same kind of reach – they'll be most effective working closely with CVS. If community organisers do not have a close relationship with existing support organisations they will not be able to support stronger relationships and a stronger civil society.

Specialist infrastructure acts to ensure that there is sufficient reach into particular communities to ensure they engage with the wider community and that social capital develops in their area. It is important that this sits alongside local generalist infrastructure.

Question 10: Do you have further suggestions or comments on how the Office for Civil Society can help frontline groups become more efficient and effective?

Particularly at a time of intense, change structures and processes that are working well need to be encouraged and not abandoned. Within given resources, and often with additional entrepreneurial activity, the existing infrastructure provision is meeting the needs of frontline groups. That is not to say that there is no room for development and support from central government, yes including financial resources, which would enable targeted capacity building for the sector to meet not only the demands of reduced funding but also the localism agenda and the challenge to develop a stronger civil society.

There is a great deal of expertise that already sits within the voluntary sector, particularly in terms of infrastructure. There is absolutely no point in re-inventing the wheel and creating new structures and processes. Existing structures are for the most part working well, but are facing enormous financial pressure over the coming months.

VCS infrastructure continues to play a vital role in increasing the effectiveness of frontline groups. So it is critical that infrastructure is supported to work with groups to help them adjust to the new policy environment such as outcome based funding, public service delivery under subcontract, Big Society, etc.

The importance of good back office support and IT to frontline groups cannot be overestimated. Access to community buildings as social hubs will be key to supporting social action in communities.

The government should listen to and support what local people want and need and not to impose top down policies that local people do not relate to. Frontline groups could then focus on their identified priorities which would enable them to be more efficient and effective.

VCOs are independent organisations that respond to the needs of their members and stakeholders and are accountable to them and this needs to be recognised and respected by government policy.