



Review of Information and Advice Service

for
Bournemouth Council for Voluntary Service

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Executive Summary

1. Introduction

The Third Sector is a vital part of the local society in creating active and enterprising communities. The Third Sector provides a voice for marginalised people, campaigns for change, meets social needs, delivers services and influences local decisions and planning. The 'Future Role of the Third Sector in social and economic regeneration.' (July 2007) consultation reportⁱ estimates the contribution of volunteering to be equivalent to a million fulltime workers.

A study by the Young Foundationⁱⁱ highlights the importance of small grass roots Third Sector organisations. These are crucial through their direct connection to the local area and priorities, and provide the opportunity for people to become involved in the design and delivery of projects tackling local issues and aspirations, and providing services to meet needs not directly addressed by mainstream organisations. They are well placed to facilitate social inclusion and positive community development, as well as economic benefits. They have a high volunteer-to-staff ratio and represent good value for money. Some are also the larger groups of the future. But they generally find it difficult to develop to a level of sustainability, facing initially a lack of skills, knowledge and funding.ⁱⁱⁱ These smaller groups do not have the infrastructure and support to which many larger Third Sector organisations have access, often at national level, nor the funding to pay for technical or legal support.

Two important components of the strategy in 'Future Role of the Third Sector' are the continuation of the 'CapacityBuilders Programme' and the provision of the 'Small Grants Programme' for small grassroots Third sector organisations. While there are a number of sources for grants to Third sector organisations there is evidence that many organisations lack the capacity to seek funding^{iv}, or to remain sustainable after any initial funding. CapacityBuilders has the objective of building this necessary capacity by encouraging and providing practical support. Such support includes responding to the needs of the local community, for example by helping groups become established; providing information and advice; training, advocacy and community representation; and in particular to reach the smallest and most marginalised communities.^v This is the context for the provision of the Information and Advice service at Bournemouth Council for Voluntary Service (BCVS).

Amongst the smaller and emerging groups, B&ME groups are a focus for these services. People from B&ME groups have particular difficulty in accessing specialist services partly because of language or culture barriers, but also through not knowing what is available. Thus these have been an important focus for BCVS, typically requiring a higher level of interaction and one-to-one support.

2. Background

The population of Bournemouth is diverse, and has a high concentration of elderly retired people, but also a significant younger population. Despite being a generally affluent area, there are significant pockets of deprivation, and problems such as alcohol abuse and teenage pregnancy are above the national average. The area appears to have lower levels of volunteering than might be expected, and below that of neighbouring communities.

BCVS aims to strengthen Bournemouth's Third Sector organisations by providing a range of services and facilities to meet their needs. One of these is the Information and Advice Service, aimed particularly at B&ME and disability and the smaller grass roots Third Sector groups.

3. The purpose and focus of the work

The purpose of this work was to provide an evaluation focussing specifically on the Advice Project measured primarily against the agreed aims and objectives as stated in the original Big Lottery application. The findings will support future development and delivery of the advice service and capacity building in the Third Sector in general.

4. The stakeholders

The key stakeholders are the evaluation target audience, with a focus on B&ME and disability groups. Other stakeholders to be included in the interviews were Bournemouth Borough Council, Poole CVS (geographically closest CVS) and the Adviser from BCVS.

5. Methodology

The study is designed mainly as a qualitative review, with some quantitative analysis of the records kept by BCVS and other materials. An interview approach was considered appropriate. A survey was not practical as several other surveys had been administered recently, with increasingly poor response rates, indicating over-burdening of the sector with questionnaires.

The evaluation questions were as follows:

- In what ways have the skills and knowledge of Third Sector staff, volunteers and trustees, and specifically those of B&ME and disability organisations, developed as a result of the information and advice service, and the various training and networking opportunities that have been part of the service?

- In what ways has this enabled Third Sector organisations to deliver their services more effectively to their clients?
- To what degree have these networking opportunities impacted on, and strengthened, the work of the local Third Sector?
- What would be the impact on the local VCS and on local service delivery in general should advice, information, training, support and networking cease to be available from BCVS?

6. Findings

The Advice Project provides a broad range of information, advice and training that support core capacity and skills development for the Third Sector. The service is accessible by telephone and email, and through one-to-one appointments. Web services have been extended over the time of the project; newsletters are published quarterly; training venues are local with about 8-12 courses provided per annum, reaching 38 groups in 2007. In addition there are various services that support networking.

Within the groups that have engaged with BCVS, awareness of all the information and advice services is reasonably good. Uptake of service from the initial publicity broadly met original targets, with 139 groups engaging with the service over 2005-2007. BCVS are now actively promoting the service through colleagues and pursuing other means of advertising to ensure the right groups are targeted and aware of the service.

For the 19 groups interviewed, the advice function provides them with the opportunity of active engagement through the one-to-one support and training, which has been crucial. In contrast, merely providing information is a passive one-way activity, and is necessary but not sufficient. Nor is it sufficient to provide groups with support just to obtain funding - they also need the skills and capacity to know how to manage this funding and organise themselves.

For all the organisations interviewed BCVS had a significant 'impact' on establishing status and transforming a potential idea into an organisation with a constitution. Eight of these have registered or are actively planning to become a registered charity. All operational groups which had worked with the Advice Service indicated they had some kind of management structure, and established policies and procedures. Most had at least one paid member of staff, four or more regular volunteers, and a strong sense and awareness of the importance of proper management, policies and procedures.

There is a sense that if the service were to be stopped, not only would Third Sector organisations progress much more slowly, several would not be able to progress at all. Time is often of the essence in keeping momentum going, and seeing positive results in organisational development are important milestones.

Unanimously, all interviewees, whether start-up groups or established branches of national charities, commend the approach, speed of response, thoroughness, overall quality and trustworthiness of information and the service provided by the Advisor. Follow-up, and referral to appropriate third parties, is also reported to work extremely well. A simple phone call or email provides the answer to many important questions:

Whether there is an ongoing dependency on the service is not clear. It is certainly something the groups appreciate and take advantage of, but the degree to which help is sought, say after achieving registered charitable status, appears to be far less.

The one-to-one support has been particularly appreciated by the groups, with generous time commitment to B&ME groups.

Feedback indicates that the service for B&ME groups is sensitive and patient, which is also corroborated by feedback provided to other officers. Data from the work record provided by the Advisor on the actual number of hours spent with a group indicate that B&ME groups averaged more than twice the time commitment than disability groups. People from B&ME groups have particular difficulty in accessing many specialist services (eg health) as a result of language barriers, lack of knowledge, and lack of confidence or trust^v. The 1-1 support provides a way of reaching these communities in a way that most mainstream services do not provide. This not only helps them develop as a Third Sector group, but also empowers them to gain confidence and knowledge to access other mainstream services. Provision of the 1-1 support from a mainstream CVS also provides opportunity to promote social cohesion with different ethnic groups (and other Third Sector groups) through the process of “bridging”^{vi}.

Networking opportunities are also appreciated by the Third Sector, and the annual conferences and AGM elicited positive feedback. The Trustees' Network provides opportunity for further development, but for some groups was still of limited value due to perceived low attendance. The Register of Contacts, a directory of local services, is used routinely by the groups, and seen as an important part of the information service. The e-forums are growing in popularity, with 346 communications made in 2007.

Impact - long term sustainable change - is difficult to measure and attribute to any single intervention. Each of the smaller groups that have grown over the past two or three years has a proud story to tell. As growing organisations, the services they provide to users have increased and have changed from direct support to enablement of the client group. New projects or services have been started and capacity to innovate as well as sustain existing services has developed. New client groups have been engaged: for example a resident action group moved from providing a service to children, to services for disabled and older people, and then for younger people. Volunteering within these groups has

increased. Several organisations do report active collaboration with the statutory sector; all see this as an important goal for their sustainability and growth.

The evidence from the interviews suggests that the service has empowered B&ME groups to connect with other organisations and ethnic groups.

The interviews did not systematically explore the wider community and societal impact, though anecdotally there is some evidence of this. However, impact at this level is typically a result of a number of interventions and changes which develop the Third Sector and the wider community.

An example of this is the account of a small project which has grown into a thriving community group. Many of the impacts are synonymous with reducing social isolation and strong community development, for example:

- in improving physical amenities and safety
- developing social roles such as increased volunteering, employment, opportunities for leisure activities and exercise, working with neighbours and creative development
- and in relationships, creating new social networks, self esteem and a sense of affiliation.

This group has a good reputation and is held up as an exemplar by Bournemouth Borough Council, the councillors, and the police.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

The thrust of the Information and Advice Service has been on developing internal capacity and capability in the local Third Sector, primarily in the smaller grass-roots voluntary organisations. They are well placed to facilitate social inclusion, and there is evidence of this from the interviews, particularly for B&ME groups.

In addition, these smaller groups do not have the infrastructure and support to which many larger Third Sector organisations have access, often at national level, nor the funding to pay for technical or legal support. People from B&ME groups have particular difficulty in accessing specialist services partly because of language or culture barriers, but also through not knowing what is available.

The study found that virtually all who have engaged with the service commended it for its quality, responsiveness, thoroughness and friendliness.

The service has directly supported the development of the local Third Sector in improving the quality of their organisational arrangements and supported their development needs, mainly by increasing management and individual capacity and by creating a credible profile to the outside world.

The service has

- been actively used by 139 groups over 2005-07, of which over 28% are disability groups, and 10% B&ME groups
- helped organisations on the road to registered charitable status
- had a positive impact on most groups that have participated, on their ability to operate autonomously, achieve financial stability and develop services for their client groups
- developed good relations with many minority ethnic groups.

The 1-1 support has been a critical factor in the impact of the service, as it provides an immediate fit between the needs of the group and the intervention and advice provided. This provides good depth of support for the organisations that have participated.

Recommendations

1. Continue the service

Continue provision of the Information and Advice Service, develop a sustainable funding strategy for this service, and increase coverage of sector depending on findings from market research.

2. Market research and evaluation

Continue to obtain more intelligence about the size and nature of the Third Sector community in Bournemouth, their needs and how these are changing over time, to inform the work of the Information and Advice Project.

3. Communications and Marketing

Consider how to extend awareness and coverage of this capacity building service, continuing to target the B&ME, disability and smaller grass roots groups.

Consider the image of BCVS as a whole: there is a perception BCVS is Boscombe focused, not least because of its location. This image may be of less consequence for the Information and Advice Service, as much of this is conducted through email and telephone, and using a variety of venues. However, the perceptions of BCVS as a whole do reflect on the Information and Advice Service.

4. Service enhancements

Continue to develop the Trustees' Network and recruitment and development of Trustees.

Provide an advance calendar of events and training, and consider further signposting to other training.

Consider opportunities for using peer to peer support within the Third Sector.

5. Ways of working and collaboration with other infrastructure organisations

Continue to work with Poole CVS and Dorset Race Equality to identify areas where resources can be usefully combined, potentially developing areas of expertise.

