

MAPPING THE VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR IN BATH AND NORTH EAST SOMERSET - ABSTRACT & EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

John Palmer and Salma Ahmed, North Harbour Consulting, October 2007

ABSTRACT

The main points to come out of this research are that:

- the voluntary and community sector (VCS) in B&NES is much larger and far more significant in social and economic terms than was previously believed;
- it has the potential to make a greater contribution to meeting community needs and delivering Council priorities and programmes than it does at present; but
- it is hampered by a lack of information, poor communication between its members, patchy support services and an absence of leadership and strategic thinking.

Government policy is driving a new vision for the role of the VCS in strengthening communities, delivering public services and developing new forms of enterprise. In B&NES, the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) is intended to set the local agenda and then bring together public, private and VCS resources to deliver it. But the Council and its partners have not yet thought through in what ways the VCS should play its part or whether the sector as it currently exists has the necessary capacity or the resources to deliver. A long-term approach to developing the sector and the environment in which it works is needed, organised around a VCS development partnership with a shared vision, an agreed strategy and good business planning. The starting point for this project is a joint Statement of Intent from all the leading partners.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

About the study

The study profiles the voluntary and community sector (VCS) in B&NES, and answers questions about its contribution based on existing sources of information and interviews with VCS and Council managers. There is both a national and a local context for the study. Nationally, the Treasury and Cabinet Office review of the role of the Third Sector in social and economic regeneration, the Quirk Review of public asset transfer, and the ongoing ChangeUp programme to support VCS development with better infrastructure services are all relevant. So too are the B&NES Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), the Community Strategy, the Local Area Agreement (LAA), and discussions within public sector agencies about the best way of commissioning appropriate services from voluntary and community organisations (VCOs).

It was accepted from the outset that there might be gaps in the information about the VCS that would make it difficult to fulfil every aspect of the study brief. The study was successful in compiling data about VCS characteristics, but it would also be true to say that information about the VCS in B&NES is fragmented and of variable quality. Where there is no hard data, we have made 'best estimates' of the current position. Some of these estimates are based on assumptions. Wherever possible, these assumptions have been validated by reference to comparable data taken from other studies.

However, in some cases we have made an estimate which is itself based on another estimate. These should be considered as 'speculation' rather than 'fact'. We have tried to make it clear in the text how reliable we think each figure is. In spite of these reservations, this study is breaking new ground in giving a profile of the VCS and its support agencies in B&NES and making recommendations for the sector's future development.

Profile of the VCS in B&NES - Headlines

There are around 2,000 voluntary and community organisations in B&NES. More than half these organisations are involved in five main types of activity:

- sport and exercise;
- health and social care;
- social and leisure activities;
- grants and funding; and
- arts, culture and media.

A further quarter of these organisations are involved in:

- education and training;
- children and young people;
- community development;
- environment and conservation; and
- faith and religion.

We estimate that more than 20,000 people act as volunteers. That is 12% of the B&NES population. Of these, around 5,600 people act as charity trustees; and as many as 12,000 people are possibly involved with the management of VCOs of all kinds.

According to Council research (Voicebox 12) more than 6,500 volunteers are likely to be aged under 35. This runs counter to the common perception that volunteering is in decline among younger people.

We estimate that volunteers working with VCOs contribute more than 5 million hours of their time every year. On this basis, the annual value of volunteering in B&NES is around £29 million.

The total number of people employed on a full-time or part-time basis in the VCS is around 12,500, or 15% of the economically active population in B&NES.

Our best estimate of the sector's income is around £25 million per annum. Based on regional averages,

- around 1,000 VCOs (half of all local VCOs) probably have an income of less than £10,000 per annum;
- 600 (30%) have an income of between £10,000 and £100,000 per annum;
- 250 (12%) have an income of between £100,000 and £1 million; and
- possibly as many as 180 (9%) have an income of more than £1 million per annum.

B&NES Council and PCT funding for the voluntary and community sector was £5.25 million in 2006/2007. This is 20% of our estimate of all VCS funding.

Based on our estimates of income and the value of volunteering, we calculate that the gross value added to the B&NES economy each year by the VCS is around £50 million. This makes the VCS contribution to the local economy greater than that of the advertising sector, for example, and comparable with other elements of the creative services industry which is particularly significant in B&NES.

Commentary on the VCS in B&NES

There is a very large voluntary and community sector in B&NES given the size and population of the local authority area. It is diverse, and involved in a wide range of activity. It involves large numbers of volunteers; and it makes a very substantial

contribution to local community life. Yet little is known about the sector and about the large number of small, local groups in particular.

There have been no previous mapping studies in B&NES of any note; therefore existing knowledge about the VCS is incomplete. Previous estimates of the size of the sector are two- to three-times lower than our own count. Interpreting the information that we have been able to collect about the B&NES VCS in comparison with data from studies we have conducted elsewhere, it seems likely that at least half of all B&NES VCOs are small, have very little funding, and are likely to have a very localised base for their activities. For this reason they are sometimes hard to identify, yet they play an important role in communities.

Evidence from our other studies also suggests that these small groups need a regular flow of volunteers, plus access to information, advice and support to keep them going if they do not receive public or charitable funding. This means that they need to know where to get support, and good quality support services need to be readily available. This is not the case in B&NES, where the majority of frontline groups are not in contact with either the VCS organisations that lead and provide support for the sector, or with the Council. This finding has thrown into prominence the role of VCS support organisations, and the Council's involvement with and funding for the sector.

There are two generic support providers - B&NES CVS and the Volunteer Centre.

- The CVS is doing good work and is well regarded by its peers and by Council officers. While it is clearly meeting all its contractual obligation and sets out to provide services for the whole VCS in B&NES, some observers suggest that its coverage across the B&NES area is uneven. (This is not just a problem for the CVS in B&NES - CVSs elsewhere experience similar issues of lower service take-up in rural areas). Resources, as well as the sheer volume of catch-up work that the CVS is attempting, are underlying issues.
- The Volunteer Centre is also doing good work and is well regarded by most of those we spoke to. However, the Volunteer Centre is not a member of the Voluntary Sector Steering Group which coordinates activity among the leading support and network VCOs. We think it should be.

There are five other specialist support organisations which are significant in particular areas of activity:

- Community Action (the rural community council for the West of England area);
- Bath Racial Equality Council (BREC);
- the Care Forum, that works with health and social care providers;
- The West of England Council for Independent Living (WECIL) that focuses on support for disabled people; and
- Envolve, advocating the sustainable use of resources.

Taking an overview of these organisations and the services they provide, it is clear that while there is good work taking place, the sum of the various parts does not add up to a coherent whole. VCS support services are patchy across B&NES. Some groups are plugged in to support services and others - possibly a majority of VCOs - are not linked in at all.

Our conclusion is that infrastructure and network support for the VCS in B&NES are fragmented. There are three reasons for this:

- the basic mapping of 'who needs what' and 'who does what' has not been carried out, so there is no evidence base on which to build a coherent strategy for developing and supporting the sector;
- there are divisions between some of the leading VCS support organisations, caused partly by their focus on their own priorities and concerns, and partly by their reluctance to collaborate with one of the key organisations;
- there is an absence of overall leadership when it comes to developing a vision and strategy for the way the VCS should develop, and for the kind of support services that the sector as a whole will need as it moves forward.

B&NES Council and the VCS

The Council is seen by VCS managers and some of its own officers as departmentally-driven in the way that it works with the VCS. Each department has its own network of relationships, and these are not joined up internally. This makes it difficult for the sector to collaborate with the Council; difficult for support and network organisations to advise front-line VCOs on Council priorities and programmes; and difficult for the Council to engage with the sector at a corporate level.

This has immediate implications for the Council's ability to engage the VCS in strategic partnerships around the LSP and LAA. In the longer term it means that neither the VCS support organisations nor the Council are in a position to promote the kind of development within the sector that is envisaged in government policy and that will be needed if the Council's own aims are to be achieved.

In many ways the disjointed approach to working with the sector within the Council mirrors the fragmentation of the VCS itself. Just as the VCS and its lead bodies do not have a clear identity or a vision for their future; so the Council, whilst being generally well-disposed towards the VCS, does not have a corporate strategy for how it sees the VCS and what its own role should be in developing and supporting the sector.

Conclusion

The VCS in B&NES is large and very active. It involves large numbers of volunteers; it makes a very substantial contribution to local community life; and it has a significant impact on the local economy. Yet very little is known about the sector, and about the many smaller groups within it. There is a significant lack of coherence in the way that it is organised and presents itself to the wider world. It is several years behind VCS networks in some other parts of the South West Region in terms of its organisation and ability to engage as a sector with changing social needs and public programmes. The sector needs to develop a clear identity and purpose. To do this it needs leadership and high quality support. And as a starting point all those involved with the sector need to have much better information about its characteristics and activities, and there need to be better systems for communicating with front-line VCOs. Taken together, these point to the need for a new strategy for VCS development in B&NES.

Recommendations

The key headings under which a strategy for VCS development programme would be assembled are similar to those around which the current programme of investment in support services by CapacityBuilders is being organised:

- vision for the future;
- leadership;
- strategy and planning;
- identity and structure;
- programme delivery and coordination;
- resourcing the development programme.

Vision

Social change and policy change are making new demands on the VCS. To meet these challenges head-on, it is essential for the VCS in B&NES to develop a shared understanding of its role in the area and a vision for its future.

Given the sector's fragmentation, it is not viable for a vision to be developed in the short term in a way that involves the sector as a whole in democratic debate. The infrastructure and network organisations, in consultation with their public sector partners, have a responsibility to start the process by outlining a vision of what the VCS will look like in ten years time, and a strategy for promoting change. They should then work through the existing networks to develop this and embed it within the sector's thinking whilst starting an initial programme of work.

Leadership

The only agencies that are currently in a position to start the process of change are the VCS support organisations plus possibly a small number of other significant VCOs, such as Somer Housing, which might have an important role in facilitating asset transfer from public bodies to the wider VCS. These lead agencies need to do two things. They need to think about the role and contribution of the VCS in the twenty-first century; and given the weak track record of Avon-wide VCS development in the post ChangeUp era, they need a common agenda for VCS development, support and promotion.

Strategy and planning

The B&NES infrastructure and network organisations should pool their existing knowledge to carry out three inter-related tasks over the next three to six months:

- consider what kinds of change are needed within the VCS in response to the community cohesion, community capacity-building and public service delivery agendas;
- identify the main information and support needs that B&NES front line groups have now, and will increasingly have as they respond to these new demands; and
- assess the extent to which the support services that are needed can be delivered within the current framework, and what changes are needed.

Out of this initial profile, it will be possible to develop a strategy for the development of the sector locally, and in its sub-regional and regional context; and a business plan for the way in which the sector would meet these developmental and support needs.

Identity and structure

The sector needs an identity that is lacking due to its fragmentation at present. It also needs some form of organised structure. At the core of this is the need to have contact information about frontline groups and a reliable method of communicating with them. The contacts database that we have assembled is a starting point for this process, but the information is still incomplete.

We recommend that a partnership of leading VCOs and the Council should subscribe to the Guidestar UK data sets on charities and companies limited by guarantee. Even with this information, it will still be necessary to find a way of obtaining information on the many small unconstituted groups that are neither charities nor companies. Information of this kind would form the basis for communicating with the sector on a one-to-one basis, and through a range of different media including web-based and other electronic media. It would also allow more detailed mapping that builds on the foundations of this study.

Programme delivery and coordination

Evidence from ChangeUp work in other parts of the country is that a VCS development programme cannot be sustained by one organisation acting alone, or by a number of different organisations working separately from each other. It is therefore essential that, as part of the visioning and strategic planning exercise that we are recommending, the question of programme delivery and coordination is addressed.

Our recommendation is that:

- an expanded and more inclusive Voluntary Sector Forum should become the consultative user body for inclusive VCS development;
- delivery should be entrusted to a formal partnership of VCS support organisations working in close collaboration with B&NES Council and the LSP - a 'VCS Development Partnership' - that would include all those organisations that provide support services for front-line VCOs;
- the VCS development partnership should form an executive committee to drive forward the work programme;
- this executive might be built around an augmented Voluntary Sector Steering Group whose terms of reference already give it a line of accountability to the Voluntary Sector Forum;

- there should be a lead support organisation coordinating day to day work (but not undertaking the whole work programme);
- the partnership should have agreed terms of reference that incorporate
 - a 'code of conduct' governing matters such as conflict of interest;
 - terms of reference for the executive committee; and
 - protocols governing accountability of the partnership to the user forum, and of individual support agencies to the partnership.

Resourcing a VCS development programme

One of the principles underlying government policy for the VCS is the view that the sector needs to become more 'sustainable'. That means five things:

- using whatever public and charitable funding is available to pump-prime activities;
- maximising the use of voluntary effort and community resources in support of VCO objectives;
- generating income wherever possible through activities (e.g. sale of goods and services, development of new not-for-profit enterprises);
- strengthening the sector's asset base; and
- redeploying existing resources to meet future needs rather than perpetuating historical patterns of spending.

These same principles apply to a VCS development programme. Resources for this programme would probably come from four main sources:

- local authority and other public sector funding focused around regeneration, corporate programmes such as the community strategy and LAA, and bespoke funding for VCS development to pump-prime change in the sector;
- funding from national agencies (CapacityBuilders, FutureBuilders, Big Lottery/Basis) and charities with an interest in VCS development;
- reprioritising current activities, refocusing existing money for service delivery by infrastructure bodies into a more strategic approach to VCS development;
- appropriate asset transfer to support new enterprises and activities; and
- a greater emphasis on joint working and the avoidance of duplication between agencies.

Successful negotiation of new money and redeployment of existing resources will depend on the ability of the sector to make a strong business case for support. This case would be based around the vision, development strategy and business planning that we advocate.

The role of the Council and LSP

B&NES Council and its partners in the LSP have an important role to play in assisting the development of a vibrant and dynamic VCS in its area. We believe there are three ways they need to respond to this challenge:

- they need to support the development of a strategy for VCS change, initially via the leading support and network providers, and in the medium term through inclusive structures that involve the sector as a whole;
- they have an important commissioning role to play in clarifying the leadership role of the main support and network organisations; and to achieve both of these objectives,
- they need to clarify their corporate policies for the sector, and achieve greater consistency of approach between individual departments within the Council, and between members of the LSP.

Statement of Intent: A statement of intent is needed from the Council and its partners as a first step. This should set out a vision for:

- the kind of VCS that they wish to see in B&NES;
- how they see the sector's role in strengthening communities through developing community capacity and assets, improving public services, and being involved in new forms of enterprise;
- how they will help to support a VCS development programme, and the place of this programme within the Community Strategy and the LAA.

Developing the framework: The Compact Board is the ideal forum in which to discuss how the Council and its partners can work with the VCS to achieve a future-orientated development strategy and business plan for the VCS in B&NES. It is essential that all the key players - including important VCOs, public sector organisations such as NHS Trusts and the Police - are involved in some way in influencing the VCS development programme, either through the Compact Board or the LSP. This means that there must be strong links between the LSP and the Compact.

We envisage that the LSP should take on responsibility for overseeing the Compact and become its guardian.

Commissioning infrastructure development: It is desirable for the commissioned services agreements for VCS support organisations to be centred on their role in developing the sector and in facilitating VCS involvement in key programmes such as the LAA. The outcomes on which funding would be based should be linked initially to the development of an agreed development programme for the VCS, and subsequently to the delivery of this programme in accordance with the business plan.

Local accountability: The Volunteer Centre and Bath Racial Equality Council have management boards and terms of reference that focus all their energies on the B&NES area. Other organisations such as B&NES CVS, Community Action, the Care Forum and WECIL have governing bodies and aims that by their very nature cover a wider area than B&NES. In terms of service delivery and where contracts are involved there this is not necessarily a barrier to effective service delivery. However, in the case of infrastructure services this lack of co-terminosity in the areas being served by key organisations could potentially weaken the B&NES focus of third sector development activity unless the delivery of the different organisations is very well planned and coordinated. The absence of a well thought out Changeup infrastructure development plan provides some evidence for this view.

A requirement to work together: The Council should consider whether it should continue to fund or support any organisation that is unwilling to play a part in sector-wide development in some form, or to work collaboratively with other infrastructure and network organisations in the interests of developing the voluntary sector as a whole.

A Third Sector Development Agency for B&NES? One possible way forward that would deal with issues of delivery and local accountability would be for the Council to commission a 'Third Sector Development Agency' for B&NES. This could either be a single organisation or a hub of organisations working to a common purpose. Either approach would fit easily into the structures for programme delivery and coordination that we have suggested above.

Funding VCS development

The Council and its LSP partners have a key role in funding VCS development.

In 2006/2007, just over £220,000 (4% of the Council's total VCS funding) was allocated

specifically to four VCS umbrella organisations. Looking forward, there is a need for the Council and its partners to support better leadership and a higher level of VCS infrastructure capacity and delivery by the VCS support bodies. That probably carries with it a requirement to consider new ways of funding infrastructure support. The options might include:

- achieving a greater return on existing investment in infrastructure organisations by the Council and its partners;
- increasing the proportion of total expenditure on support for the VCS which is allocated to infrastructure support;
- helping the sector to lever-in funding from outside bodies such as CapacityBuilders and FutureBuilders; and/or
- increasing total levels of funding in order to promote VCS development and improved infrastructure support.

This funding should be predicated on the development by the 'VCS development partnership' in consultation with the wider VCS of a vision and strategy for VCS development and a business plan

Other recommendations

We further recommend that the Council should:

- ensure that all departments become signatories to the Compact within six months (i.e. not later than 31 March 2008) as a basis for a more consistent approach;
- standardise its commissioned services agreements; and
- review the continued use of discretionary grants as a basis for departmental funding and establish clear guidelines for when discretionary grants are and are not appropriate.

All members of the LSP should sign up to the Compact if they have not done so.

The Compact codes of practice need to be supported by organisational and departmental action plans that set out clearly in what way each of the LSP partners will foster the codes.

For more information about this report contact North Harbour Consulting - T: 023 9238 1190;
E: northharbour@btconnect.com