North Harbour Consulting

Briefing
MAPPING STUDIES AND INFORMATION SYSTEMS – OUR APPROACH

MAPPING STUDIES OF THE VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR

1.   Voluntary and community sector networking organisations and their funders are taking an interest in mapping third sector in their areas of operation, or in the developing information systems that profile the sector. North Harbour Consulting has extensive experience in this area of work, and we are publishing this briefing to offer advice to organisations that are considering carrying out work of this kind for the first time.

2.   The normal process that we adopt for these studies is to:

    2.1   compile listings of contact details in either Access, Excel, Word or Outlook .pst format (within Data Protection Act 1998 rules) from whatever sources are available – chiefly local authority departments and third sector networking or infrastructure organisations, augmented from other sources including NHS trusts, BME community networks, faith networks such as Churches Together and Interfaith Forums, and topic-based networks covering areas such as disability, children and young people, older people or the environment etc;

    2.2   migrate this data into a purpose-designed Access database;

    2.3   carry out data checking and cleaning to remove duplicate records and identify anomalies;

    2.4   use the contact details (as amended by responses) to address and generate consultation letters or survey pro formas which can be delivered by email or by post;

    2.5   log responses onto further purpose-designed data entry screens; and

    2.6   generate 'reports' that tabulate numerical and text responses as a basis for analysis and reporting.

3.   As an alternative, we are developing a capability to undertake surveys on-line, in which respondents fill in the data entry screens for themselves and, on saving their information, their unique record is saved and used to update and on-line database in real time. We have now completed a research study for the London |Councils Housing Service using this approach, and would advocate on-line data collection for both surveys and information systems in future.

4.   A number of studies that we have completed were completed prior to the publication of the NAVCA-Audit Commission VCS profiling toolkit in July 2006. Reading through the NAVCA report and the appendices, however, we are struck by the very close similarities between the guidance and the audits that we undertook in Brighton and Hove, Oxfordshire and elsewhere – although there are a few issues on which we believe our approach is superior. We are therefore fully up to date and comply with the guidance contained in the NAVCA/Audit Commission report.

5. The process we have set out above might need to be adapted in particular cases for a number of reasons.

    5.1 Firstly, the timetable and budget for studies of this kind vary, and it is sometimes necessary to cut corners, using the best existing database for contacts rather than compiling a composite database from a number of different sources.

    5.2 Secondly, and for the same reasons, it is usually a good idea to review existing information on the VCS in the district to establish its coverage, reliability and vintage (i.e. how recently was it collected) before embarking on a completely fresh study.

    5.3 A swift turn-round of responses from individual VCOs is needed if anything approaching the usual timetable for this study is to be achieved. To the extent that there is useful information already available, it might be preferable to carry out a data collection exercise as a supplementary or follow-up enquiry, updating some existing information and possibly adding new questions – but only if there is existing data to start with.

6. If on the other hand no previous mapping work has been carried out, then our experience shows that the mapping survey pro forma has to be kept relatively short with straightforward questions that are not going to cause concerns or difficulties for smaller front lines groups. This also helps to avoid controversial issues about which some third sector organisations might be cautious about sharing their information with third parties. Financial information is often a sensitive area. The aim has to be to obtain information about as much of the sector as possible, or at least from a more or less 'representative' cross-section[1]. A 20% response rate has to be the minimum that is useful, with 35%+ being the target[2]. A short questionnaire asking basic questions about 'who you are, what you do, where you work and how people can use your services or take part in your activities' is more likely to be answered than one that asks a lot of more complicated questions about staffing, volunteers, funding, premises etc. These will take time for the respondent to research and answer, and that is a deterrent for volunteers who may already be over-committed.

7. And yet, to answer all the questions that arise in relation to mapping studies and third sector information systems, the temptation will be to ask more rather than fewer questions. This was a difficulty for the steering groups in both the Brighton and Hove and Oxfordshire mapping exercises. In both of those cases the questionnaires were fairly comprehensive and this affected the overall response rate.

8. The NAVCA toolkit does not deal explicitly with this issue, and the survey pro forma in the NAVCA report's Appendix 1 contains sections covering most of the things you need to know about the VCS in an area.

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[1] There is a 'chicken and egg' problem here because if there is no previous data then 'representativeness' cannot be checked in any statistical sense, but it can be gauged by comparing results with those derived from studies in other similar areas, and from the local knowledge of the Council and partner organisations who will know which groups and organisations are missing.

[2] These response rates may appear low, but our experience and that from similar surveys elsewhere shows that a 35% response is pretty good.

9.   In contrast, the Hampshire e.VOLve project is taking a longer term view, collecting basic information in year one, then adding to it in subsequent years as the year 1 information is updated. That is partly why the decision was taken to build an ongoing information system updated on a six-monthly or annual cycle that meets a number of different needs, rather then spend perhaps 35% of the same money on a one-off mapping survey that can only give a snap-shot of the situation at one point in time.

10.   To summarise: there is a trade-off to be made between response rate and depth of information required. There are then further trade-offs to be made in terms of what it is reasonable to collect within a given timetable, and for a given budget. In our judgement, the correct balance can only be struck by those with local knowledge, but we would wish to contribute our experience to any discussions about these choices if we were appointed.

DATA PROTECTION ACT 1998

11.   Compliance with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 1998 is a major consideration in setting up a project of this kind. In our previous studies we have agreed with the project steering group that if an organisation's name and contact details are available to the public anywhere, then the same information can be transferred into a mapping study contact database. However, there are exceptions to this general rule that apply to very small groups whose address and phone number may be someone's home contact details which constitute 'personal information' under the Act. In these cases it is important not to make blanket assumptions about the use of this data unless there is an existing (and reasonably up to date) signed authority to use the information for stated purposes, and this should include the sharing of the information with other agencies (i.e. ourselves). If this permission does not exist or is limited, then we recommend that the agency holding the contact details should write to the individual concerned asking for permission to share the information and/or to use it for the purposes of the mapping exercise. On the face of it, it would appear perverse for someone who is running a small local community group not to want the information shared or publicised, but it does happen. Obtaining permission to share personal information takes time and can affect our ability to deliver results within a tight project timetable.

REPORTING RESULTS AND DEVELOPING A STRATEGIC RESPONSE

12.   Carrying out a technically competent mapping survey is only the first part of the process, however. Once the database has been populated with survey data, the statistical and qualitative responses have to be analysed, interpreted and reported. Our preferred way of working is to write up the data in one or more working papers for circulation to and discussion by the project steering group before we go on to the next stage of preparing a draft report. We do this because we believe it is important for stakeholders to fully understand the evidence base on which they will later be making decisions about policy and strategy. A discussion of the working paper(s) means that the outlines of strategic thinking will have begun to emerge as the findings and conclusions are discussed.

13.   We can build on this in the reporting process in a way that ensures that the steering group and other stakeholders already have understanding and ownership of the final results.

14.   The social research and mapping studies that we carry out inevitably lead on to discussions about policy and strategy. Because we have been involved closely with a number of local authorities, NHS bodies, rural community councils and councils of voluntary service over the past decade we have also been involved in working within the context of evolving central government and local authority programmes and partnerships. This includes most recently the DEFRA Rural Social and Community Programme, ChangeUp, local strategic partnerships and community plans, the development of local compacts, the LAA process and, most recently, the role of the 'Third Sector' in public service delivery.

15.   The Oxfordshire ChangeUp programme and its local infrastructure development plan were developed against the background of an active LSP and LAA process being promoted by the county council, and we liaised directly with senior managers in the chief executive's department and also with senior managers in the district councils. We had similar experiences in Surrey, the Isle of Wight, Hampshire, Portsmouth, and Bath and North East Somerset. We found that there were opportunities for the transfer of knowledge and ideas by working on ChangeUp in several areas simultaneously. We were also actively involved in the regional meetings for ChangeUp consortia run jointly by RAISE and the Government Office for the South East, through which there was a considerable level of collaboration between local consortia.

VCS MAPPING AND INFORMATION SYSTEM STUDIES – OUR CAPABILITIES

16.   North Harbour Consulting draws on many years experience in the social research and community development fields. As part of this work we have extensive experience of building, populating and using large Access databases and smaller Excel databases in connection with research studies, mapping and consultation exercises, and the development of information systems for the third sector. Relevant projects include:

16.1   development of contact management and research databases compiled from a mosaic of contact management systems owned by local authorities and voluntary organisations for -

16.1.1 the 2003 economic and social audit of the community and voluntary sector in Brighton and Hove, commissioned by a partnership of statutory and voluntary organisations (c. 2,500 records) – report available on http://www.cvsectorforum.org.uk/audit/index.asp; and

16.1.2 the first comprehensive database with information about the voluntary and community sector in Oxfordshire and their use of infrastructure support services as part of the Home Office-funded ChangeUp programme (c. 4,800 records) – report available on http://www.raise-networks.org.uk/changeup/yourArea/localDocuments.html;

16.1.3 creation of smaller contact management systems to support surveys of and consultation with BME and faith communities, and with VCS infrastructure providers in Surrey and the Isle of Wight as part of the ChangeUp Additional Support Programme[3] - reports also available on http://www.raise-networks.org.uk/changeup/yourArea/localDocuments.html;

16.2 creation of a contact management and consultation database for a study of community facilities in Alton, Hampshire, that contained 268 records, the majority of which related to VCOs;

16.3 creation of a contact management and research analysis database as part of a Housing Corporation-funded study of disability in five rural areas, which at completion of the project contained around 1,400 records of individuals and organisations;

16.4 compilation of an information system with 2,000 records from multiple existing sources for Bath and North East Somerset Council and the Voluntary Sector Steering Group, associated with a mapping study and strategic review of the sector's capacity and contribution to Council programmes.

17. We also carried out the feasibility study, then project-managed the implementation of e.**VOL**ve – the interactive web-site and data base giving information to the general public and professional users about the voluntary and community sector in the Hampshire sub-region, on behalf of a consortium led by Community Action Hampshire and Hampshire County Council – see http://www.e.volve.org.uk/ and handout included in the mailed hard copy of this proposal.

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March 2007, updated May 2008

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[3] Part of ChangeUp dedicated to exploring the infrastructure support and community capacity building needs of BME, Faith, Refugee and Asylum Seeker, Gypsy and Traveller Communities in the South East Region