FINAL REPORT OF THE TRIAGE & CONNECT GROUP

THE WAY AHEAD

SUMMARY

The Triage and Connect Group met a total of four times since The Way Ahead meeting on 30th November 2016. There were several dominant themes which ran through our discussions:

- The need to connect organisations and people at all levels
- The need for agreed standards and good accessible training for organisations
- Improved communication and the development of networking across the sector
- The need for infrastructure bodies to remain locally focused to influence change and be accessible to their communities
- The importance of intelligent funding

INTRODUCTION

It was agreed that the purpose of the group was to look at a way to make triage and communication work at all levels. It was recognised that there is a real need for individuals and groups to be connected, whether horizontally within a community, or vertically through infrastructure bodies, umbrella groups and other forms of support.

Our recommendations are tentative, we are all agreed that more research needs to be done into the impact of changes to the infrastructure. There were two options for progress towards achieving this, either an assessment of where we are now using mapping as a tool to do this, or an agreement of where we want to be, working backwards to plan towards this.

The report sets out the discussions which have taken place and the conclusions the group has come to, together with our final recommendations.

METHODS UTILISED

In addition to the 'task and finish' group meetings, we conducted internet based research; a focus group with small local organisations; an online survey and one-to-one discussions.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

The need to connect diverse organisations and people at different levels, making a one-size-fits-all approach unsuitable

It was agreed that there needs to be a solid structure and places for organisations to access information and advice as they need it. Currently the information is out there but not always easy to find. The idea of an online facility such as a hub containing guidance, information and downloadable documents could help, but the group raised concerns about keeping such a facility up to date.

History has proved that a centralised system for holding information, such as the Do-It website or Borough-wide community directories can initially be successful, but centralised changes made without understanding the needs of local users, or the failure to keep information updated can make them ineffectual. In the case of Do-it many Volunteer Centres no longer post their voluntary opportunities on the system, which has led to a plethora of individual local alternatives.

There were issues raised about who was responsible to updating such systems and if they had the capacity to do so. As set out below, centralised hub could not work without 'spokes' from the hub enabling local and face-to-face contact. The group agreeing that the main issue was funding.

There are diagnostic tools which could assist organisations access support, but these would rely on face to face triage, digital or a mixture of both.

The need for agreed standards and good accessible training for organisations

For triage to work effectively, there has to be confidence that organisations providing support are providing quality information.

It was agreed the idea of a minimum standard for support groups - feeding in to some form of accreditation - would work. This could be supported by regionally held information which could be accessed locally, helping to reflect the diverse issues and geography across London.

There was consensus within the group that the introduction of a minimum standard for organisations involving volunteers would be both beneficial and a 'quick win' for work arising from *The Way Ahead*. This could be

implemented quickly with a simple checklist supported by a physical certificate/kitemark, which could be assessed either through self-assessment or by Volunteer Centres. The framework for this is already in place through GLV's Volunteering Charter.

It was agreed that recognised standard of support for voluntary organisations would help them to engage and influence the wider sector, as well as influence funders and ultimately the money they provide. This would assist 120,000 community groups across London.

The question posed within the groups for such work on standards would be who decides the criteria that groups have to meet.

Improved communication and the development of networking across the sector

The group agreed that networking was vitally important - especially at a city wide level - and the impact that properly organised networking could have on smaller groups would be invaluable. An organised networking system would help integrate other London wide organisations and encourage the private sector. The group highlighted the importance of co-production and supporting community-based individuals and agencies, especially in a city with such social diversity. The group have produced a survey which has been circulated and is intended to collect ideas and comments from organisations that are supported by infrastructure organisations. (see Appendix D).

Concern was raised regarding the funding of networking events at the local level, where funding was constantly an issue with many voluntary managers now attending events on their own time. It was agreed there was a need to address issues around the ability and capacity of organisations to attend networking events in the future.

The need for infrastructure bodies to remain locally focused to influence change and be accessible to their communities

A key point from both group discussion and our research was the need to retain locally based infrastructure. Many small groups remain unaware of the broader voluntary sector, and even the support they can find at a local level. The work of CVS's in supporting and developing small groups would be hard to replicate through any remote or online alternative.

Volunteer Centres also require a local presence. While many people can turn to the internet to access volunteering, the face-to-face work of Volunteer Centre brokerage often deals with people facing the most barriers to volunteering, such as mental health problems, a lack of confidence or a criminal record. Support for volunteer management also needs a local presence to encourage organisations to engage and thereby improve their volunteer involvement.

The group agreed that a vital role for infrastructure is networking and engaging with groups. It helps to create a feeling of inclusion, especially for small community groups within the sector.

The importance of intelligent funding

The group agreed that funders and similar providers of support needed to be influenced with an understanding of what the voluntary sector does and the value it adds to society.

The current system which focuses certain funding on "deprived boroughs" across London is unfair. There are pockets of deprivation even in the most affluent of boroughs and this is not recognised under the current system.

The closure of CVS and Volunteer Centres across London hasn't helped as this has taken away the institutional and individual knowledge from those organisations, and left local groups and individuals with no one to engage with.

Many CVS/Volunteer Centres are now not easily accessible to local communities. An exception is Croydon CVA which owes its success to its central location within Croydon town centre, which receives a large amount of foot fall and helps to engage face to face with volunteers within the area. Croydon CVA is run for and by volunteers which is a main contributor towards its continuing success.

It was agreed that Local Authorities should offer up community assets such as vacant shops to CVSs (see Appendix A). The idea of Regional Hubs would help especially providing support to the smaller CVSs, this would encourage them to provide a face to face triage service. The idea of informal grouping of boroughs together was discussed at length and although a good idea there was a possibility that in practice this wouldn't work as there was too much "politics" at play on this level (see Appendix B).

Slipham Living Lab

David Wilcox and his colleague Drew Mackie have produced a game/workshop to address inclusion issues within communities. To do this they have created an imaginary Borough – Slipham (see Appendix C).

Evolving a set of methods, they have created a package which explores urban issues through scenarios to encourage community groups to make the most of their assets.

The workshop is basically a trading game which can help groups engage, look at asset based community development, create connections through geographic mapping through connectors, activities and resources as well as assist groups to use social media effectively. By creating fictional characters' players can think about who connects to who and the support needs of a wide range of people.

SUMMARY OF ONLINE RESEARCH

Voluntary Sector Infrastructure and Location

There has been little work looking at the importance of place and location for voluntary sector infrastructure. Surprisingly (given brokerage has always been a key function) we were unable to find research into the impact of location on Volunteer Centres.

In addition, there is a lack of research into the general awareness of small community groups of the wider voluntary sector infrastructure and support services. Anecdotally many seem to be isolated and lacking connections with or knowledge of national or regional groups – sometimes including their CVS/Volunteer Centres.

The main findings we came across were in work for the Independent Commission on the Future of Third Sector Infrastructure and the Baring Foundation. Some work from the Third Sector Research Centre also gives some more general results on capacity building. We have summarised the key information below.

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In 2015 the Navca-funded Independent Commission on the Future of Third Sector Infrastructure published their report *Making Change for Good: Independent research into the future support needs of the voluntary sector and the role of infrastructure in meeting those needs* [1]. It was accompanied by primary and secondary research reports. Some of the findings are relevant to our work:

Where support is needed, the greatest need for smaller organisations and groups is face-to-face support, often one-to-one.

> *If we want groups to come to events, to get them involved in initiatives that are different and new, we have to ring them, go to their houses or their meeting places to engage with them... with the below the radar groups it's the face-to-face that you need to get a response.*

Online provision of support will not meet all needs, as a significant minority of smaller organisations and groups have limited or no access to technology and/or the internet. This is a big argument for investment in local infrastructure provision.

> *We're finding I think that organisations still would prefer to have one to one help to get them up to speed. This is something we can provide for the moment, but it's not clear how long we'll have funding to do it.*

> Primary research findings – summary report1

The primary research also challenges the idea that everyone can access online information. Noting a push to provide services online it states that:

> *Smaller organisations and groups with limited or no access to technology will be increasingly disadvantaged in this environment. This links to the needs of smaller organisations and groups outlined above, and reinforces the argument for investment in infrastructure provision.*

The Baring Foundation's 2015 report Place-based funding – developing the ecology of the social sector formed part of their strengthening the Voluntary Sector programme. It identified a need for 'community anchors' ("defined broadly so as to encompass CVS, development trusts, community foundations, local housing associations, residents associations, settlements, etc"). Location per se was not a focus of the research, but the need for a local presence is implicit.

In our own survey, the interviewees referred to the need for support for voluntary organisations, at a local level, to variously:

- work together, the large with the small, to address community needs;

- work with the public and the private sectors to ensure the best use of and sharing of resources;

- act as catalysts for the development of support for the most vulnerable;

- develop projects to lever additional resources into areas;

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[1] https://www.navca.org.uk/resources/111-commission-on-the-future-of-local-infrastructure-research

- come together, the large and small, to deliver contracts and positively influence public service delivery;

- support communities in identifying their assets and deploying them;

- focus on the health service and demonstrate the value of preventative work in tackling health inequalities;

- market build by demonstrating how the voluntary sector can help the public sector achieve the outcomes it needs to achieve, particularly, perhaps, in the field of public health;

- develop a better understanding of the voluntary sector/social sector ecology;

and,

- have a stronger voice (particularly with regard to public service delivery).

Place-based funding – developing the ecology of the social sector (2)

All of these suggest the need for at least some infrastructure functions to maintain a local presence.

Building Capabilities in the Voluntary Sector: What the evidence tells us (3) was commissioned by the Big Lottery Fund and written by the Third Sector Research Centre. While it doesn't specifically address location much of what it says addresses the context in which support to the voluntary sector is provided.

Some findings of the report are fairly tentative, but they claim strong evidence for the following:

- A recognition of the complexities of capacity/capability building, in terms of its purpose, targets, methods, mode of delivery and context. Such complexity challenges the idea that straightforward comparisons between different approaches and initiatives are meaningful or possible.

- The need for tailoring and flexibility in capability building is an important response to this complexity, and should include paying attention to the whole organisation or partnership.

Building Capabilities in the Voluntary Sector: What the evidence tells us

In other words, a one-size-fits-all approach is not advisable. Whatever form or forms support takes it must be driven by the needs of local organisations and not a top-down solution.

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[2] http://baringfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Place-based-funding.pdf

SUMMARY

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Research needs to be done on the importance of place and location for voluntary sector infrastructure.**
    There has been a lack of research into the general awareness and support services for small community groups, which has resulted in isolation, lack of connection with or knowledge of national and regional groups, including CVS/Volunteer Centres.

2. **Invest locally but with a requirement to be part of the wider infrastructure network.**
    Our greatest asset is people who need to engage at each level, locally and nationally. Successful communication relies on face to face contact supported by projects who talk to each other and share information.

3. **Pairing infrastructure organisation across boroughs/expanding across borough boundaries where is no infrastructure**
Consistency of quality and support across the sector is vitally important to address areas of deprivation e.g.: Newham and Wandsworth where volunteer centres have closed and there is currently no adequate support to local communities, and people only have access to online provision, which often excludes the vulnerable.

4. **Introduction of a minimum standard for the support offered to voluntary organisations and developing quality standards at different levels**
This would help to engage and influence the wider sector. There are quality standards already in place but these are expensive and difficult to fund. The use of charter marks for the minimum standards required to accept volunteers via Volunteer Centres would be helpful and would lead to organisations better recruiting and retaining volunteers.

5. **Investigate the possibilities and cost of a centralised hub where tool kits, advise and signposting can be centralized/standardised**
Organisations need a place to access quality information and advice, this is especially important for small organisations. A virtual hub with a list of organisation meeting the required standard of support and advice backed up with downloadable documents would be useful. However, what is quality and who is responsible for the updates to such a service?

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ATTENDEES

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https://www.navca.org.uk/resources/111-commission-on-the-future-of-local-infrastructure-research

APPENDICES

Appendix A – Civil Society Support – Survey results

Appendix B – Slipham Living Lab