

Submission: Supporting a Stronger Civil Society

About Adfam

Adfam was founded in 1984 by the mother of a heroin user who could not find the support she needed to deal with her unique set of problems. Since then Adfam has grown into the national umbrella organisation representing a growing and diverse network of community activists supporting families with multiple problems, and also works to represent families' interests in the wider drug sector, through providing training, resources and information in this complex area. Adfam lists over 130 local, frontline support agencies on its website and disseminates fortnightly briefings on family support to over 1,300 subscribers nationwide.

Adfam works to improve the quality of life for families affected by drugs and alcohol and expand the availability and quality of support to meet their needs. Family support organisations offer a huge range of services including counselling, respite care, training, mediation, helplines and therapeutic interventions, as well as information on specific issues such as bereavement, finance, kinship care, imprisonment and drug treatment. Many are vital pillars of their communities and have a huge role to play in the Big Society.

1. How can online services for frontline groups be improved?

The key issue here is not necessarily creating new information, but ensuring that the right information is available to people in the right place, at the right time: as the consultation document recognises, resources should be shared efficiently and in a timely manner.

Though competition of course exists in the voluntary sector, there is also a great willingness to share good practice and a common bond of solidarity that helps to gel voluntary groups together. What voluntary and community services often value the most is not top-down information (though this is useful in areas like funding, governance or training guidance) but 'horizontal' learning from organisations on an equal footing and experiencing the same kind of obstacles. The provision of this type of networking facility could demonstrate the government's commitment to a more effective and connected voluntary sector.

The voluntary and community sector is as wide and varied as any other – it contains a huge number of organisations with vastly different histories, philosophies, aims and objectives, not to mention funding levels and staff structures. A single online hub of information for all charities would have to address wide subject areas from charity law to child protection, and thus may be rendered extremely difficult to navigate. Online support needs to be more specialised: for example, support for services that work with families affected by drugs and alcohol often struggle to find information that is relevant to their needs from more generic sources, and need to look to organisations such as Adfam. As the umbrella organisation for these services, Adfam seeks to work with central

government departments and local areas to develop and link services across the country to build the evidence base of what works and, crucially, make sure this evidence is accessible.

Charities need access to information that is relevant to them and their work, without having to wade through layers of 'support' that have no bearing on their circumstances. Using targeted, beneficiary-specific umbrella organisations as a conduit makes perfect sense here, as does splitting information into separate areas. As ever, the key is ensuring that this information is easily accessible and fully informed by the needs of the voluntary sector and the communities they seek to serve.

Infrastructure organisations and government also need the resources to ensure information is in an accessible format for everyone, which includes taking into account factors including internet speed/access, language and location. Although online information is a very valuable medium, some communities do not have internet access or use of computers to access this information. It is important that other mediums are used.

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

Giving up time, money or guidance is not an automatic choice and for those with the desire to get involved in civil society, it can be difficult to understand who to approach and how. If motivation alone could be relied upon, there would already be a fully functioning system of skills transfer, but this is not the case. People need to see that it can be worth their while and a valuable, rewarding experience for them and their organisation. Options for improvement include mentoring schemes and employer-supported volunteering, as mentioned in the consultation document; there is a role for government, alongside infrastructure organisations, of helping to embed these.

This could also be linked in with the online support discussed previously. A network facility where charities are able to advertise what they need, and partners are able to list what they are offering, would prove very useful. For example, a skills register or 'time bank' could be set up, which would allow prospective volunteers and businesses to advertise their time, resources or experience to local civil society organisations, who could then make an approach. A facility whereby businesses and organisations could contact each other to network and share good practice would also be welcome.

The Coalition Government has made much of 'nudging' people to make good decisions through creating an environment in which positive choices can be easily made, and this is also relevant when it comes to volunteering and skills partnerships. The system should be set up to make it as easy as possible for voluntary organisations to attract and keep volunteers, and it should be a priority to avoid the loss of motivation that happens when someone likes the idea of volunteering but doesn't know where to start, who to contact or how to go about it.

There is a risk that during a recession and when many people are losing their jobs, we are not in the ideal environment for an explosion of selflessness; or on the other hand, it could be an opportunity for voluntary organisations to attract people and expertise that they may not have done before. There has been much talk of the private sector being relied upon to secure the country's economic recovery, but there may also be a role for the voluntary and community sector in creating employment opportunities.

As the government 'nudges' individuals to make good choices to support their communities, it is important not to forget the responsibilities for businesses to the communities within which they operate. Large and smaller business leaders need to be reminded of their corporate responsibilities and the processes within which they can offer skills and resources.

3. How could brokerage of pro bono support be improved?

If an attempt were made to broker this support at national government level (for example through a website) this may become unwieldy. The alternatives seem much more feasible: either brokering support at local level (thereby making numbers much more manageable) or through existing infrastructure organisations, which split different areas of the voluntary sector into smaller parts based on need. The ability of umbrella bodies to bridge the gap between smaller voluntary and community organisations, businesses and central government could be invaluable here.

Networks of voluntary organisations are relatively easy to contact – for example through local Councils for Voluntary Services, Citizens' Advice Bureaux, directories or umbrella organisations. However, there is no such overarching body for people who might be interested in helping a local civil society organisation – leadership on the supply side of pro bono support is needed much more acutely than on the demand side.

Pro bono support, employer-supported volunteering and mentoring schemes could be a much bigger part of Corporate Social Responsibility policies. Government has a role in spreading the knowledge that cash donations are not the only way to help a charity in a time of financial concern, and equipping voluntary organisations with the skills and knowledge they need to plan for the future might be an alternative way to support them.

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

As noted earlier, the links between umbrella organisations and businesses can be difficult to broker and secure. Adfam would welcome some support from the government to identify business partners and their skills and resources that may support our work for families affected by drugs and alcohol. Sustained relationships with businesses and their staff would support Adfam to become more resilient through the provision of expertise, facilities and resources. It is worth noting that in order to enable communities to meet local needs, national leadership from specialist bodies within the sector is needed to drive this change. Organisations such as Adfam should be viewed as 'change agents' that can support both the government and local community organisations to make this shift.

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

Helping charities to support themselves. Securing a small amount of money for a staff position or two-year workstream is of course beneficial, but once this kind of money runs out the voluntary organisation is still often left with the same deficit of infrastructure, long-term strategy or governance that it had before.

Building resilience with a focus on longevity should be the focus of a bursary fund – supporting the voluntary sector to achieve self-sufficiency by identifying partnership opportunities with the private sector, improving bid writing skills and forging links with public sector and local decision makers to continue to provide invaluable input to civil society.

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

A key theme running through this whole consultation is the need for better coordination of existing resources and ideas, not the creation of new and expensive ways of working. The best way for a fund to be delivered simply and fairly is for it to be transparent, available and accessible. In response to Iain Duncan Smith's repeated comments on the 'Tescoisation' of the voluntary sector, the playing field needs to be level rather than large organisations using their superior resources to secure even more.

In terms of available bursaries, people need to know the money is there; they need to know how to apply for it; and the application process needs to be accessible to people and organisations who are already overworked in providing frontline services. Small organisations don't have entire departments dedicated to fundraising and instead have to fit it in around their busy day of frontline work: bursaries need to be available to exactly this type of voluntary agency.

The government must also recognise that good work is equally, if not more, deserving of recognition than innovation. In the past there has been a great focus on innovation and new ways of working, and this has sometimes led to a lack of support for established and successful initiatives. A bursary fund should be fair in that it rewards promise and proven effectiveness, and not just constant reinvention.

There could also be input from infrastructure organisations in the delivery of bursary funds. With the necessary checks and balances, there is an opportunity for government to lean on the knowledge of 'experts through experience' for help in distributing funds. This could lessen the chances of money being wasted, as infrastructure bodies are in a better position to recognise 'what works' and have strong links with voluntary and community services which might benefit the most from such funds.

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

Infrastructure organisations that support voluntary and community services across society provide invaluable information and capacity building to enable vital work in communities to flourish. However, there may well be opportunities for some of these organisations to consolidate some of their functions or services to create efficiencies and resilience. However it is vital that, in an attempt to create efficiencies or consolidate skills, the specialisms and expertise that are valued by some of the most vulnerable in society are not lost.

Consolidating or merging support can be a costly and complicated process. Consolidation grants could be awarded to enable organisations to identify their shared areas of work and what functions could be consolidated, without any impact being felt by the community organisations and people they serve. The legal processes and lengthy discussions that go hand in hand with mergers or consolidated services can be costly and require expertise that may not be held within the organisations. Grants may enable organisations to purchase or work with experts in this area to best effect.

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?

Government can help to manufacture a positive environment for people to take action, and create a system which eliminates the feeling that setting up a charity is too hard, or that finding funding is impossible. Local voluntary organisations need to be linked in with others at the earliest opportunity to help negotiate these obstacles.

As well as simply helping to improve social capital, there is also a need to ensure that it is directed in the most useful way and has a real impact – especially in communities where existing social capital is low. The Coalition Government has shown its willingness to establish parity with measures such as the ‘pupil premium’, whereby schools are rewarded for achieving outcomes with poorer students. There could be an interesting parallel in the case of civil society here: the government could establish a system of tariffs or premiums which recognises both the incredibly valuable work done for less glamorous causes (including drugs and alcohol issues, and other related causes like people with mental health problems, offenders or the homeless) and the social impact they have on their neighbourhoods. As has been mentioned before, charities working in difficult areas can struggle more than others to attract funding and public support, but this does not mean their work is any less valuable, and in many cases is more so in terms of social impact. Local Councillors, for example, may be reluctant to stake their electoral reputations on ‘undesirable’ issues, and businesses may also be unwilling to attach their name and expertise to causes that don’t look attractive; but tackling these difficult issues is a key way of building social capital.

9. How can central Government best work with national infrastructure to support and deliver the Big Society?

The response to this question was submitted separately as per the specified deadline. Adfam’s comments are available [here](#) (pdf).

Contact

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