

Submission: Supporting a Stronger Civil Society

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

About Adfam

Adfam is the national umbrella organisation working to improve the quality of life for families affected by drugs and alcohol. We do this by working with a network of practitioners and organisations coming into contact with the families, friends and carers affected.

Adfam has over 25 years of experience supporting families affected by drug and alcohol use, providing good practice guidance, training, resources and information for established, new and prospective providers of family support. Started by the mother of a heroin user, Adfam retains an independent, community-led ethos but works across the country to improve, expand and develop the support available for families affected by drugs and alcohol.

Summary

The overall theme of this response is the role of infrastructure organisations in offering expert, sector-wide knowledge; facilitating productive relationships between Government and the voluntary sector to promote effective ways of working; and building the capacity of the voluntary sector to engage with local decision-making procedures. Different subject areas are set out below.

Representing the sector

Infrastructure organisations should act as lightning rods for central Government – their relationships with partners are the ideal route to access information and ensure that Government priorities are up-to-date and truly represent opinion in local communities. Infrastructure organisations have the ability to detect patterns, trends, common queries and complaints across a whole sector, and have access to a wide range of views and opinions - an invaluable shortcut in consultation exercises.

Infrastructure organisations are also useful for their ability to bring together a national picture. Local groups know their own area and business intimately, but can be less aware of what other, similar organisations might be doing at the other side of the country; this is the kind of information infrastructure organisations hold and which can be vital in making strategic, long-term decisions.

Training and guidance

Unfortunately, volunteers often do not present themselves to local charities, and not all voluntary sector organisations have the systems and procedures in place to take on people offering their time for free. Local organisations need guidance in this area, and infrastructure organisations are well placed to disseminate it.

Services need the capacity to attract, motivate and maintain relationships with volunteers – this cannot be assumed as explicit in all organisations, and will not appear from nowhere. Volunteer staff are staff nonetheless, and should be treated as such; if they are not managed properly (for example a small service taking on more volunteers than it needs and having nothing for them to do) then this could damage the reputation and appeal of volunteering overall, and harm the organic growth of the planned volunteer expansion. It is also worth noting that according to the latest NCVO figures, 26% of people volunteer at least once a month – this is already a huge number of people, and equal efforts should be dedicated to keeping these people motivated as helping to attract new volunteers, and there is clearly a huge base to build on.

Infrastructure organisations have an ear to the ground of key issues across the sector, and are therefore able to work with Government to identify measures to provide noticeable, cost-effective improvements. Infrastructure organisations also provide the easiest route for contacting community organisations ‘under their umbrella’, and sponsorship of Government initiatives from infrastructure bodies can vouch for programmes they have helped to design, helping increase their uptake. Infrastructure organisations have long-standing relationships of trust with partner agencies, and these can be a vital route of access for Government.

Sharing and supporting good practice

Sharing information about ‘what works’ is a key role of any umbrella body, and one that can be enhanced by effective partnership with Government and its priorities. Too many small voluntary services do not have access to appropriate networks and share information and gain recognition, and bringing them together will go a long way to creating the Big Society. Through the medium of infrastructure organisations, this process can be quicker and more efficient.

Existing services need to be recognised and credited, and emerging ones need to be supported and networked with others. Voluntary organisations need to feel that their work in the community is being rewarded, and that they are being included in any new local systems as valuable and equal partners. The Government has a key role, working alongside infrastructure organisations, of locating, supporting and strengthening areas of promise and using this learning to inform and educate others in the field.

Governance

An independent, community-orientated, community-led sector cannot survive purely on ambition and goodwill; services must be able to plan for the future too. Government can have a key role in

facilitating a long-term strategy for development and building a resilient, professional and dynamic voluntary sector. Trustees and board members, managers, accountants, venue owners, lawyers and solicitors, fundraisers, philanthropists, business partners and trainers are all in demand, and reliable sources of information on these aspects of running a voluntary organisation are at a premium.

There is definite scope for partnership between infrastructure organisations and Government in spreading good practice and resources related to the institutional, practical challenges of running a civil society organisation. The suggestion of the consultation document that better connections can be fostered between small organisations and skilled volunteers or mentors is a good one, and infrastructure organisations could be used as the 'hub' for this kind of information, rather than it being hosted by central Government.

Negotiating the new terrain

Infrastructure organisations have a key role to play in helping community groups make the most of the new environment – the Big Society is seen widely as a movement of promise, but may also be fraught with the traditional difficulties of applying for funding, competing with other (often larger) organisations and managing the disparity between ambition and the true cost of running a charity.

The consultation document states that the Office for Civil Society will 'get resources into the sector' and 'make it easier for the sector to work with the state', which will be difficult in times when local authorities will inevitably pass on some of their budget reductions to community organisations. It is therefore vital that small voluntary organisations can hit the ground running in terms of funding structures and decision-making procedures. Infrastructure organisations can fill the gap between state and community partners, ensuring that funding gets directly to those that need it.

Infrastructure organisations, working alongside Government, can help community groups make the most of the new environment by increasing their ability to 'be at the table' and engage with local decision makers. In line with the Government's ethos of transparency, it should be easier than ever for local community organisations to find out what funds and resources are available, to whom, when, what for and so on; it should also be easy for these organisations to contribute to decision-making processes in a real and meaningful way.

Adfam agrees that the voluntary sector will need to embrace new skills, partnerships and organisational models if they are to seize the opportunities that lie ahead, and that working alongside infrastructure bodies will help them to do this.

One thing the voluntary sector cannot be expected to do is immediately pick up the tab for cut or cancelled public services, free of charge. This would be a perversion of the stated aims of the Big Society, and give credence to the media argument that the Big Society is a back-door way of getting low-quality public services on the cheap. The initiatives of the Big Society must support civil society – not simply take it for granted.

Matching up supply and demand

No system – especially one which is being asked to provide vital public services – can survive on motivation alone. The willingness and ability of mentors outside the voluntary sector (for example lawyers, business experts or entrepreneurs) to provide valuable time and resources should not be assumed, and arguments for the benefits on both sides need to be clear. Companies or businesses need something above and beyond sheer goodwill to establish long-lasting and productive relationships; there should be an appropriate system to encourage people to contribute and see the good it can do for all concerned. Infrastructure organisations can help in matching up the supply of, and demand for, these services, and play an important role in disseminating information in this area.

Communications and publicity

There is still an impression – in the public more so than Government – that charities are a simple, homogenous group, and there is a great deal of misunderstanding of its roles and responsibilities. The Government can play a key role in supporting a transition from a simple ‘charity’ view to one in which people recognise the voluntary sector as a sophisticated, essential provider of services for the public good, particularly small services at local level. This is especially relevant to the Big Society agenda, with the need to promote the successes of small community organisations: the latest NCVO Civil Society Almanac reported that just 0.3% of voluntary sector organisations account for 44% of resources in the sector. This does not accurately reflect the real work going on at the local level – the level that the Big Society movement is sponsoring.

Supporting families affected by drugs and alcohol

The family support sector is already delivering the Big Society: local people taking the initiative in tackling difficult problems in their community, with a strong volunteer-led base and targeting some of society’s most marginalised families. The family support sector - and its staff - understand and deliver the idea of the Big Society, and Adfam would be happy to work further alongside the Government to discuss learning in this area.

Further information

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