

Mansfield CVS



Main theme: Increase income lost due to grants

Mansfield Council for Voluntary Support (CVS) work to release the potential of individuals, groups and communities in Mansfield by providing support for local voluntary and community groups, operating a volunteer bureau and acting as a voice for the voluntary sector in Mansfield.

Recently Mansfield CVS began trading when they successfully tendered for contracts to support long-term unemployed people back into work using volunteering as a means of developing their skills and confidence. Adrian Dewhurst, the Sustainability Officer at Mansfield CVS explains how the opportunity arose.

"We were approached to provide something that was missing in Mansfield in terms of supporting people back into work, specifically in terms of developing life skills and work skills. We were asked if we would be interested in tendering for some work. In the past we have done a lot to help people develop skills through volunteering, and while there are a lot of private sector organisations that make a lot of money from training, and while there are a lot of money from training and developing people, we have never been rewarded for it. We have a volunteer bureau but it's very difficult to sustain having staff in that area. However volunteering is a route back into work for many people and it was nice to think that Mansfield CVS could be rewarded financially for getting someone back into employment.

So, for probably the first time in this organisation we wrote a tender, responded to specification and secured a contract against that. The whole concept was to develop a programme of support for unemployed people, so we developed an

eight module programme to help people get back into work through volunteering. That small contract was the starting point, and from there we looked at other opportunities and it has just grown.

When Mansfield CVS decided to submit a competitive tender Adrian had previous experience of the tendering process but he believes that many VCOs already have the necessary skills to complete contracts...

"What I say to a lot of organisations is that if you can put a good grant application together then it's the same kind of skills – it might be a different kind of language and you have to learn about what a Pre-Qualification Questionnaire is but it's the same kind of information. It's about responding to a specification; somebody writes down what they want, what their outcomes are and what they to achieve – you've got to respond that and explain how you're going to meet those outcomes. It's very similar to what lots of voluntary organisations do to make grant applications."

If an organisation can successfully win contracts Adrian believes that there are a range of benefits to be enjoyed...

"I think the end result is that rather than have a grant that can be reduced or taken away, if you're successful and deliver the outcomes that are required it actually gives you a lot more financial flexibility. Like a commercial business if you can deliver the service for less than you are being paid to do it then you can make a surplus that can fund activities where grants or other funding are not available.

However I also think it improves the service you provide because you're more focussed on what you're delivering. When

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you're under a contract you're more focussed on the outputs you need to achieve and that's what the end user wants. If you're a commercial organisation and you don't deliver a good product or service for the money then people don't come back to you for other business. I think we're delivering a fantastic service; we have a lot of evidence coming back from long-term unemployed people that they really value what we do."

However competing for contracts will also create challenges for voluntary sector organisations...

"In the voluntary sector the word competition is always an issue – you think you deliver services that the end-users want and possibly that you're the only one that can provide that service. I think the voluntary sector fears that they're going to be having to compete with other organisations for that contract, funding or money. Some people have questioned why we're bidding for contracts in the worklessness area and we have begun competing with other organisations in Mansfield for certain money that's around. I think competition is something the voluntary sector doesn't want but it's healthy. One way to improve the quality of service is competing to deliver those services because you've got to have a product that's valued and that people want to pay for. That's what we've been able to do; we're in competition with a number of other organisations who want to attract the clients we're working with but they choose us because they know they're going to get a valuable service."

Adrian offers some advice for other voluntary sector organisations that want to start competing for contracts...

"I think every organisation needs to have a dynamic business plan. Whatever

contracts you enter into they have to be 'on mission' and in line with your values as an organisation. Writing a business plan allows you to understand what matters to your organisation and what your objectives are. Initially there were some people in our organisation that believed we were only entering contracts to generate money and they questioned why we were doing it. Now they accept that it fits into our larger agenda of supporting volunteering. Planning and understanding our objectives as an organisation helped us to prove that the contract we entered into fits with the ethos of our organisation."

Key lessons:

- You may be able to generate revenue from your expertise
- Contracting offers improved financial stability compared to grants
- Working under contracts can improve quality of service
- You may face resistance to competing with other organisations
- A business plan can clarify how trading fits within larger organisational strategies

Legal structure: Incorporated Charity
Main activity: Worklessness contracts
Number of employees: 27
Turnover: £600,000
Location: Mansfield, Nottingham
Date formed: 1980
Percentage of generated income: 7%
Date written: February 2010
Website:

www.mansfieldcvs.org.uk

This case study is one of a series produced by the Capacity Builders funded 'Stepping Up To Enterprise' project in the East Midlands.

The case studies tell the stories of voluntary or community organisations and how they moved to developing trading. The case studies are available on the website

www.oneeastmidlands.org.uk/sute.