

Insight

The One East Midlands Magazine

Autumn 2011

Issue 8

INSIDE:

Understanding the Market
Next Steps to Mixed Income
Spotlight on Locality

Welcome

Cuts, deficit, austerity measures, recession. The world is a bit of gloomy place right now and the VCS is definitely taking its fair share of 'collateral damage' in the process. It is true that the rhetoric of Government that focuses on localism and individuals choice and control over public services offers some real longer term opportunities for income generation and sustaining services. However, the time gap between cuts happening now and these new innovative approaches coming on stream means that survival in the mean time will be tough going.

One EM has been closely considering these issues in respect of the East Midlands Funding Advice Network (EMFAN) project; refocusing our traditional focus on fundraising and the skills of advisors to one which looks far more holistically at wider sustainability, diversification and income generating skills.

This edition of Insight draws together the highlights of the current network approach and details many ideas and resources that might help us batten down the hatches and ride out the storm, hoping for sunnier days ahead.

Rachel Quinn,
Chief Executive



Sing your song

This autumn we are running a publicity campaign for fanoogle, our new Lottery-funded website promoting funding advice services in the region and showcasing what members can do for groups as well as services offered by the public sector and consultants.

One of our posters shows a bird singing into a microphone and while we chose the image to go with a quote on the poster from a music group, it is also apt because fanoogle is about singing our song on the Internet: telling the world what we can do for them.

This issue highlights what we are doing to support funding advice in the region at a time when finding funding is tough going and singing your song well and loudly is at the heart of what any funding advisor will tell you, whether you are singing to a grant funder, corporate partner or council procurement officer.

Fanoogle is open for development workers who offer funding advice to join and we plan to continue to develop it as a showcase for some of the vital services that infrastructure organisations provide for East Midlands groups. Advisors can register at www.fundingmonitor.org.uk: click Advisor login and read the instructions or email me at jgutteridge@one-em.org.uk.

Jonny Gutteridge,
Funding Advice Network Manager

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Funding advice

A way out of the woods

Jonny Gutteridge, One East Midlands

In July the East Midlands Funding Advice Network (EMFAN) debated the motion “This house believes funding advisors should focus on grants” and voted overwhelmingly against. As funding advisors we seem certain that if grants were ever the core of our work on supporting groups they certainly can’t be now. But when the best funding solution could be a combination of grants, trading, contracts, personal budgets, social investment, subs or sponsored walks, how can a single worker or a small team with dwindling support from the public purse hope to help every group who knocks on their door?

You know it but I’ll say it: the funding situation is the worst in the professional memory of most of us in the sector. In September I went to a funding roadshow in Westminster to see what I could learn from the big names there – leaders from the Big Lottery Fund (BIG), Lloyds TSB Foundation, Esmée Fairbairn, Children In Need and the Minister for Civil Society. There was little good news – Heritage Lottery Fund and the Arts Council talked about new funding, some of which used to be BIG’s share of the National Lottery pound – but competition for the grant pot is tougher than ever and most big funders are feeling the squeeze. The Minister was no more fun, he seemed to have no ideas for us other than the small hope of more social investment, money that seems unlikely to come cheap if all the bankers in the chain require a return. So voluntary sector funding in the

Big Society means competing to deliver public services at the lowest price, cutting costs by collaborating where you can, borrowing, selling and doing everything possible to fundraise from whatever source possible. And that goes for funding advisors too. 70% of the workers on the region’s funding advice network mailing list are from a voluntary organisation or local authority, most of them reliant for most or all of their funding on public money that’s been cut and could be cut again. If there are still going to be services to support investment in the voluntary sector, something’s got to change.

However, there is good news. Funding advisors in the region are quite capable of shaping themselves for this environment. Look at Leicestershire: Voluntary Action South Leicestershire’s Funds and Figures project defines a new model of sustainability support that gives as much attention to financial resilience as it does to funding, the County Council’s Big Society Grant Fund enables groups to buy in advice as part of their bid, and Voluntary Action LeicesterShire successfully combine first line telephone support, specialist support on strategically important income streams and an enterprising approach to training. Look at One East Midlands’ fanoogle service, which enables funding advisors to promote their chargeable services to new customers alongside free advice.

Back to the funding road show: the key message I took from London probably applies as much to advisors as to the people who knock on their doors: you have to understand more about why your service is valuable in terms of impact and you have to get better at telling your story. Competition is tough and you need to start selling.

For more information on the projects mentioned above visit:

Funds and Figures Project:
www.vasf.org.uk/funds-and-figures
Leicestershire County Council Big Society Grant Fund:
www.leics.gov.uk/big-society-grant-fund
Voluntary Action Leicestershire:
www.valonline.org.uk
Fanoogle:
www.fanoogle.org.uk

East Midlands
Funding Advice Network

EMFAN



Understanding the market:

Analysing your chances

The message from funders at this September's round of national funding roadshows was consistent: competition for grants is tougher, and for many, belts have been tightened. The fact that numerous VCS organisations in the region have lost staff means workloads are higher too so for a group looking for grant funding now it has become even more important to be smart about who to apply to.

Asked about this, Sean Tizzard, Regional Development Manager at Big Lottery Fund said, "There are a number of reasons why it's increasingly valuable for groups to have a better understanding of the reasons that applications are unsuccessful but I think the key one I'd highlight is 'time'. In these resource-stretched times, any system or tool which groups might access to help them save time in pursuing fruitless applications has to be a good thing."

When you work hard on a grant application you are often working in the dark. All you have to go on is the funder's guidance – which can be great – but often you don't know how many other applicants will apply, you don't know their history of funding in your area or your type of group (especially if the funding is fairly generic), you don't know how exacting they are about crossing every t and dotting every i, you don't know the hidden stumbling blocks in the way of success.

This situation doesn't help groups and it doesn't help funders. You can view a failed application as a learning experience, but in terms of getting what you need it has been a wasted effort. The funder has spent time reading your application but perhaps can't fund you because you've made an avoidable error. As Sean says, "From a funders perspective, we're also increasingly conscious of our operating costs."

It would be far better for everyone if all applications reaching the funder were always judged on the merit of your project rather than whether the right information has been provided, on time and in the right format, whether your group is even eligible.

The Funding Monitor (www.fundingmonitor.org.uk) is a One East Midlands' innovation that attempts to help make grant funding applications a more cost-effective process for everyone. A crucial development is its facility to allow funders and groups to report reasons for unsuccessful applications, so applicants can see at a glance where they might go wrong. A high number of errors on applications are avoidable. Whether you are an applicant, funding advisor or funder you can register securely with the Funding Monitor and begin to share information confidentially and contribute to the overall analysis. You can also share information about the accessibility of funders' application processes and the value of funding advice.

One East Midlands' growing role in research into VCS funding

One EM's new Lottery-supported annual survey of groups, feedback from funding advisors, and the all-new Funding Monitor website are providing valuable data to back up the organisation's learning about how the funding landscape is changing....

- Groups say grant funding will be less of a priority in 2011
- Fundraising across the spectrum is more important, with support from business a new area of interest
- Groups interviewed put a high value on independent advice from contacts in local CVS-type organisations and councils, for the confidence given as well as the expert knowledge. One said, "Often funding seems complicated, long winded and you are often left with the felling of "oh why bother" but the advice motivated us beyond this feeling," (and they made a successful funding bid).



Survey results showed respondents planned to do less grant fundraising in 2011

Perspectives on Money, Money, Mo



Stonebridge City Farm – From grants to enterprise

Opened in 1979, Stonebridge City Farm is based in the St. Ann's area of Nottingham. It operates as a visitor centre, free for all and provides education and training opportunities for adults with learning difficulties and young people not at school and other disadvantaged groups. The clients work on every aspect of the farm, from caring for farm animals to building brick walls.

For a long time the majority of the farm's funding came from grants, but as these have become harder to obtain the team has moved to developing as a social enterprise in order to continue to be sustainable.

These enterprises include a farm shop, selling the farm's produce, including rabbits, guinea pigs, hay, straw, animal foods and vegetables grown on site. During the summer the shop, run by staff and volunteers can take as much as £200 a day. The aim is to deliver retail qualifications through the shop, providing extra training and an income to employ a member of staff to develop the shop.

In addition to the shop and a café, which uses eggs, fruit and vegetables from the site, the farm's main source of income now comes from paid work placements and education courses. This includes working with Enable and other training agencies to access funding to deliver qualifications.

Although the farm has successfully adapted to create new revenue streams as grant funding disappears, this transition has been challenging. Farm Manager, Marie Rogers, explained the irony with their current financial situation:

"It costs around £250,000 to keep the place open and so we need more support from funders in a time of increasing financial pressures. Unfortunately, there are so many more demands on all the pots of funding, it is increasingly difficult to win. We know we have to become sustainable to retain this extremely valuable resource for the City of Nottingham."

Marie's advice to organisations in similar situations is:

- Get a business plan together before you start so you know what you're going to do and how you're going to do it
- Be well organised and clear on what you're trying to achieve
- And most importantly, be totally committed to the organisation and its sustainability.



For further information on Stonebridge City Farm visit www.stonebridgecityfarm.com

This is an excerpt from a case study originally written for the Stepping up to Enterprise project. For further information and case studies about social enterprise visit www.steppinguptoenterprise.org.uk

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Funding Advice – A changing world

Adrian Dewhurst, Mansfield CVS

I have been for the last several years at both ends of the funding spectrum – as an adviser to organisations looking for funding and seeking “sustainability” and also as a “fundraiser” for a Derby-based charity working with disabled children and young people.

How things have changed over the last few years

No longer is funding advice about informing a local group of the latest funding opportunity, the names of a few local and national funding bodies, or producing a funding bulletin. Over the last few years the role has changed dramatically – information is far more readily available via websites, funding alerts, e-bulletins and electronic announcements of new programmes and opportunities.

So what of the role of an adviser?

I could use the well tried label of “capacity builder.” I believe there is a distinctive role of building individual and organisational expertise to seek out opportunities, the ability to write a good bid (or more recently a good

tender), to support the greater understanding of what funders are looking for and to understand the jargon!

An example of this is our role to assist in understanding the terminology and the jargon – we have all moved from outputs to outcomes – but the next step is our ability to measure impact. For example, recently I’ve been putting together a one day session on “Measuring the Difference,” with a colleague, and we can now provide a good background to “social impact” through the Social Return on Investment (SROI) methodology.

I can be called upon to give advice on organisational structures and legal forms – should we become a social enterprise?; should we be diversifying our income?; what about setting up a subsidiary?; is a new structure – a CIC (Community Interest Company) right for us – what’s involved?

Community development and local authority cuts have taken away a lot of this support – we’re filling an ever expanding void Infrastructure support is also being squeezed, so one-to-one advice becomes increasingly difficult to resource.

Organisations have to bear the brunt of this. Investing in the development of expertise within organisations on bid and tender writing is important, but it’s another



Mansfield
Community & Voluntary
Service

overhead cost with little support from funders to accept is as a full cost recovery item, but the enlightened applicant builds it into their bids, tenders and applications.

Looking into the future, funding advisers are becoming facilitators, trainers, consultants, organisational and individual development consultants, capacity builders and community developers. There’s only one certainty for funding advisers about the future – it’s going to change!

Next steps to mixed income



Pam Whittle, Service Manager

High Peak Women's Aid (HPWA) operates a range of domestic abuse services, safe accommodation, support and counselling in Derbyshire. We began as a volunteer helpline over 30 years ago and now have 16 staff, eight volunteers and an active Board of Trustees. Last year we worked with over 250 women and their children, 60 of which were very high risk cases.

Luckily, our core grants have not been cut this year. However over the last 12 months we have lost two contracts and this has affected our income. We have also seen an increase not only in referrals but in the needs and risks of those referred, because of cuts to other local services. We have taken on additional staff to manage this increase, paying for them from reserves whilst we try to secure other funding.

How our funding has changed

In the past we relied mainly on local authority funding, first for the refuge then the children's service, followed closely by funding for the advice service and our IDVA (independent domestic violence advisors) service for those at high risk.

Between October and December 2010 we reviewed our business plan and funding contracts and identified potential sources of funding, including from businesses. We met with Esther Jones from High Peak CVS, who helped with identifying funders and gave us a lot of support with writing the bids.

Having someone on hand for advice and support has helped us to plan ahead. Because we know what we want for the organisation and how we want to develop, Esther has ensured we have up-to-date information on funding opportunities and training events.

From January to June 2011 we submitted bids to various trusts and began considering how local businesses could help. We are organising a big fundraising event with local businesses and banks and have also designed a theatre performance to raise awareness of the issues surrounding domestic violence.

We have worked hard to raise our profile in Glossop, achieving regular local newspaper and radio coverage. As a small organisation in a small rural town, we want everyone to know we're out there and want their support, putting ourselves firmly on the map.



Our successes

In terms of added value, we have secured funding for our children's services over the next three years and are building on this success all the time. The more successful we are the more potential funders are keen to support our work.

Lankelly Chase, who we applied to for funding for our Children's Service, have supported us to get a short-term post looking at sustainable funding and development of our organisation. The post holder will look at various options for sustainability and, once the most suitable option has been identified, work with us towards achieving our objectives. There will also be an element of training for staff, helping us to produce a funding strategy and updating the business plan.

Diversifying our income has led to many benefits. We were heavily dependant on local authority funding and when contracts started to end and priorities changed, this put our services at risk. We are very keen to retain some local authority funding and work closely with Derbyshire County Council, but our recent bids are very much based on funding services, which are identified in response to the changing needs of our service users. We have lots of ideas for growth and change and we are very keen to move forward.

One piece of advice is to look at partnership work – if you think there is value in bidding with other organisations prepare thoroughly and make sure that partnership agreements are in place well in advance.

For further information on High Peak Women's Aid visit www.highpeakwomensaid.org.uk.



When closure is the only option



John O'Brien, Chief Executive, Community Accounting Plus

It will come as no surprise that an increasing number of organisations are facing closure in these challenging times. While there are numerous sources of support with establishing your charity or enterprise, when it comes to closure, it is surprising how alone one can feel. As with most things, it can be simple or become very complex. Much depends on the legal form of the organisation and, of course, the state of the finances.

Groups can close for many reasons:

- In extremely rare cases, an organisation might conclude that it has achieved its objectives and so the trustees agree to close down gracefully;
- Sometimes people just get tired of the battle to obtain funding, key staff leave and the trustees just don't have the energy any more;
- Sometimes closure is a painful but calculated decision to end activity before the trouble starts;
- Unfortunately, there is often a tendency to bury heads in the sand, the trouble arrives and it all ends in tears.

Alarm bells

On a regular basis, any organisation should check that its finances are in good order. The phrase 'going concern' is used in company accounts to give some assurance that closure is not imminent. There is a balance sheet test "do the assets exceed the liabilities?" and a cash flow test "will the company be able to pay its debts as they fall due?". Good financial reports, consideration of reserves and prudent management are all important here. And you should regularly assess the potential costs of redundancy.

So what happens in practice?

In a situation where the organisation has assets (the good things like money in the bank) which exceed its liabilities (things you owe other people), then it can be relatively simple. It is perfectly possible to pay all your debts, make your staff redundant in the proper way, pay the gas bill, the tax, and of course

the accountants. Whatever's left can be distributed in accordance with your governing document. For most charities, this might involve donating the remaining funds to a similar charity.

You need to inform your regulatory body, who will remove you from their own register, and comply with their requirements. Companies House for example, require a specific form to be filed. They apparently do not require final accounts, but of course, if you are a company, you still need to comply with company law and produce them.

And don't forget that even if the entity has closed, someone, usually the last one out the door, needs to keep the accounting records; in the case of a charity, for at least six years.

The administration of closure can usually be carried out by the remaining paid staff or volunteers. You don't need to pay professionals to do this.

The problems arise when the liabilities exceed the assets. This situation can be more difficult for an unincorporated association. There is nothing to stop individual creditors who want their cash, pursuing whoever they hold responsible for what they are owed. We hear occasionally of former trustees being required to pay out of their own pockets for redundancy owed to former staff. It is rare, but if you ignore the writing on the wall and just collapse when the cash runs out, there can be painful consequences.

In the worst case scenario for an incorporated entity, one or more of your creditors (including unpaid staff) can apply to the court to have your company wound up. It's like Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) trying to get a football club closed down. If the court agrees they will appoint a licensed insolvency practitioner (liquidator) who will sell the assets to get money for the creditors – after taking their cut of course.

Alternatively a company's members or creditors themselves may approach a liquidator (a "voluntary liquidation"). At CA Plus, we've had three cases recently where we were owed money. The group themselves went into a 'creditors voluntary liquidation'. The liquidator, surprise surprise, took the lot with nothing left for the other creditors like little old CA Plus.

Some believe that incorporated status removes any risk – this is not so. Personal liability can still arise if there is any evidence of wrongful or fraudulent trading, or if you treat one creditor more favourably to the detriment of others. Limited liability status does not remove the duty of care.

The VCS is amazingly resilient, but sometimes, common sense goes out of the window and we carry on despite the obvious signs that all is not well. My advice – put budgeting and planning and good financial reports at the top of your list.

For further information on Community Accounting Plus visit www.caplus.org.uk.

“You are the funding advisor”

A problem shared

When voluntary organisations go to a funding advice service for support it is rarely as simple as signposting them to a grant application. **What would you do in these fictional but familiar situations?** The answer might seem obvious to you, but it isn't always easy to know what to do when the pressure is on.

Debt surprise

A group has got itself heavily into debt following cuts of core funding – hoping that they would find some way of getting funding that might help offset the debt. They want to carry on rather than fold, but now don't know how to get themselves out of their sticky situation, as most funders won't fund paying off a group's debt.

What should the funding advisor suggest?

The dilemma of responsibility

Essential funding has been cut from a service that a deprived community is heavily dependent on. The funding advisor's past experience of

giving the manager guidance on grant applications is that sound advice is rarely listened to – they tend to write applications their way, without much success.

How much intervention should the funding advisor give to prevent this essential service folding?

Should they complete some bids themselves in an attempt to 'kickstart' the process of funding for the group, or should they leave them to do their own thing and ignore their advice, even though the group will most likely fold?

Let us know what you think by emailing your opinion to info@emfan.org.uk. These hypothetical questions have been posted online in EMFAN's group discussion area at <http://www.linkedin.com/groups?gid=2437071>.

If your role includes giving funding advice you are invited to join the group and participate in the discussion, or opinions emailed to us will be posted anonymously.

SOCIAL MEDIA FOCUSES ON FUNDING

This year it seems every training bulletin and event has information about a social media workshop. Funding support projects have been listening because the region has produced a range of funding related social media resources.

On Facebook you can find out about funding advice on www.facebook.com/fanoogle. You'll find a link to the fanoogle funding advice search and information on the latest 'funding advisor of the week'.

Through LinkedIn the Institute of Fundraising has an East Midlands group (www.linkedin.com/groups/Institute-Fundraising-East-Midlands-3339981). And there are groups for business advisors and funding advisors managed by SEEM and EMFAN/One East Midlands.

Or on Twitter you can monitor the latest funding news from One East Midlands (twitter.com/oneeastmidlands) and the Funding Monitor (twitter.com/fundingmonitor), keep up-to-date with Big Lottery in the region (twitter.com/bigeastmids) and follow local funding folks like Nottingham's very own Funding Fairy (twitter.com/fundingfairy).



Voices from East Midlands Funding Advice Network Events

Over the last two years, EMFAN has organised a succession of free regional events for anyone who has involvement in advising VCS groups about funding issues and the network has grown to over 250 members. Events have looked at Big Society, the impact of the Spending Review, the changing role of funding advice workers, supporting fundraising, collaboration, personalisation, commissioning, social enterprise and a whole lot more.



Here's what delegates have said:

On networking with other advice workers

“Networking has given me...a wider perspective on ways of helping groups with their funding and sustainability issues.”

“It is good to know people are experiencing the same issues as me. It has highlighted the importance of getting groups to work together.”

“What's useful is talking to others in similar roles, finding we have similar challenges and concerns.”

On the learning from events

“I will be more likely to be proactive in giving groups a range of options to help with making their decisions.”

“It has highlighted the importance of getting groups to work together and advising them about all the options. I'm going to be informing groups about the importance of taking action now.”

“I learnt more about the commissioning cycle as part of the income spectrum and the implications of the Modernising Commission green paper and giving agenda.”

Reflecting on being a speaker or workshop leader

“It was evident how helpful it is for organisations to network and share good practise whilst recognising these are difficult financial times we operate in”,

Edwina Turner, solicitor who advises VCS organisations

“My best advice to funding advisers is to get to grips with the detail of fundraising methods – payroll giving, Gift Aid and the Institute Codes – and with the new world of social investment – Community Shares, Social Impact Bonds and the different types of finance through Big Society Capital”, **Kevin Curley, NAVCA Chief Executive**

“Our East Midlands team really value the links and networking opportunities EMFAN events provide as it allows them to meet funding advisers, provide updates on BIG funding and gather intelligence whilst also meeting new people they might not otherwise meet.”, **Mick McGrath, Big Lottery Fund**

For further information on joining the EMFAN network and receiving information on their future events email info@emfan.org.uk.



SPOTLIGHT

Member: Locality



1. What does Locality do?

Locality is the nationwide movement of communities ambitious for change, formed through the merger of bassac and the Development Trusts Association. Members of Locality include settlements, development trusts, social action centres and community enterprises and they have expertise in community asset ownership, collaboration, commissioning, social enterprise, community voice and advocacy.

Locality helps people to work together to create and capture local wealth. We help people to set up local organisations for the benefit of their communities and support existing organisations to work more effectively through peer-to-peer exchange and mutual support.

2. Are you involved in any work at a regional level? What benefits do you see from this level of working?

Locality works at all levels, local, regional and national. At a regional level we bring together our members to network, share skills and feedback concerns and interests to our national policy team. As a small staff team covering the East Midlands (one and half people) we keep in touch with what is going on across the region via regional events, One East Midlands, Social Enterprise East Midlands (SEEM), the Office for Civil Society (OCS) Local Intelligence team and other strategic bodies. We can't possibly have a strategic relationship with every local agency, so this helps us to be more effective for our members and keep our ear to the ground.

3. What is the community organiser programme?

Locality is the selected delivery partner for the community organiser programme. The programme will train and support up to 5,000 community organisers from 2011 to 2015. Five hundred community organisers will be senior organisers and 4,500 will be voluntary organisers who will support the senior organisers. The programme was created by the OCS

and forms a key element of the social action pillar of the Big Society.

Our approach to community organising is 'Root Solutions – Listening Matters', an action-based programme created to support transformational change in individuals, groups, organisations and institutions. The foundation of the work and training is one-to-one systematic listening and dialogue that builds trusting, respectful relationships between and across diverse communities. The community organising process enables people to take action on their own behalf and have the power and confidence to tackle the issues which are important to them. Community organisers come with no agenda and have no targets.

4. Is there a contradiction between a grassroots led movement and it being supported nationally by the government?

It is our commitment to liberate the programme from Government, by rooting it in local communities via our members and other like-minded organisations. However it is fair to say that Government have not prescribed the community organising process or the outcomes; they have invested in a programme, which they believe can revitalise democracy and transform the relationship between the state and communities.

5. What will host organisations do? How can groups get involved?

Hosts provide a 'place to be' and access to local networks and knowledge, and most importantly a desire for local transformation and openness to a new approach. Hosts must be locally rooted organisations who can withstand vested interests and create a space in which the community organisers can work. Host application information is on the programme website www.cocollaborative.co.uk.

Locality is a membership body and movement of enterprising, ambitious communities which believe in social justice. If that sounds like you – please join us! www.locality.org.uk

SPOTLIGHT

Funding Trainer: Sally Deith



1. Please describe your role and your organisation.

I work as a trainer and funding advisor for fit4funding, a Yorkshire based charity helping voluntary and community groups to access and manage funding and other income. We provide training to funding advisors, development workers and funders as well as applicants. In the East Midlands most of my work has been delivering accredited training in funding advice, in partnership with One East Midlands.

2. How do you think the training for funding advisors can best impact on the sustainability of VCS groups?

Much depends on the advisors who attend. For some, the reminder that it's not all about rapid growth in monetary terms can be a helpful pointer towards more sustainable ways of working. Others use the research assignment to evaluate new or underused income sources and their relevance for their groups. The information-sharing between participants both during and after the courses allows their user groups to access a wider range of resources and knowledge than they might otherwise have done.

3. These days advising groups on sustainability seems impossible because you have to be an expert in everything from conventional fundraising to social enterprise. Do you think general funding advisors are going to disappear?

I wouldn't be surprised to see a small number of new specialist posts created, exploring different income streams in response to the current climate, but overall I expect the number of jobs in funding advice to decline in the next few years. If that's the case (and I hope I'm wrong), I don't think there'll be enough advisors for them to lose the generalist role, though I'm sure there's scope to specialise informally, and networks like EMFAN could facilitate this.

4. One East Midlands' fanoogle web pages list all sorts of funding advice services in the region. If you were a group looking for advice, how can you know that you're getting good advice? Do you think there's any future in the idea of a quality mark?

In 2007/8 fit4funding, NAVCA and Funding Information North East developed a draft competency framework for funding advisors, funded by the Finance Hub. The advisors and development workers we surveyed supported the idea and favoured external assessment, but questioned how this would be resourced. (Ironically, before we could take this further, the Finance Hub funding – and the Finance Hub – ended.) I think a quality mark would benefit both customers and advisors – a high number of people attend our courses seeking reassurance that they're 'doing it right', because of a lack of appropriate benchmarks. I can't see it leading to huge pay rises any time soon, but we might all score more highly on the 'happiness index'...

For further information on fit4funding visit www.fit4funding.org.uk. Sally's recent work in the region has been in partnership with One East Midlands, supported by Big Lottery Fund. For information about the range of our support to funding advisors please see www.emfan.org.uk or contact Jonny Gutteridge, 0115 934 8471 / jgutteridge@one-em.org.uk.

Report

Learning & Skills Third Sector Strategic Dialogues

The first of two strategic dialogues, facilitated by the Third Sector National Learning Alliance (TSNLA) to analyse and address the challenges faced across the further education and skills sector, took place in Birmingham on the 23 September.

Dialogue 1 provided the opportunity for stakeholder groups from across the third sector to identify the key messages to send to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) and the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA).

The Chair of TSNLA, Tim Ward set the context for the dialogues by looking at the current development in the Learning and Skills agenda against a background of:

- Public funding cuts
- Need for economic growth
- Increase in unemployment – particularly for the young
- Move from control to being accountable to the wider community; localism and the Big Society

He also outlined how the TSNLA has been engaging with the change. Given current developments at the SFA, key TSNLA activity is focused around the introduction of Minimum Contract Levels, their impact on sector providers and the learner and the changes in European Social Fund (ESF) procurement.

Key areas for consideration were summarised, including subcontracting; adult and community learning; further education loans; funding simplification, changes to the Young Peoples Learning Agency; and further policy direction from the SFA. Table top discussions which focused on adult and young people's learning issues, were facilitated by TSNLA directors, and explored current strategic challenges. Some key points raised during discussions included:

- All the work done with the Learning & Skills Council doesn't seem to have transferred over to the SFA. The sector needs to explain to the SFA its unique selling point - what do "we" do differently to other agencies - so that they understand where third sector providers fit into the chain.
- The need to establish a level playing field in respect of local networks. The Local Learning & Skills Partnerships networks of the local authority, voluntary and community sector providers and further education colleges are under threat from those coming in who don't recognise the value of such partnerships.

back

- More appreciation is needed of the time and investment third sector organisations need in getting to “the starting point”, often something that other sectors don’t have to consider.
- The timing of tender releases is often an issue with agencies having a tendency to issue everything all at once; it’s not just how long they give organisations to respond, but how many things come out together. Short time scales favour those currently holding contracts.
- The agencies need to understand how both the public and third sector contributes: what compliments and what conflicts.
- There was a general sense that the third sector as a whole had “lost its voice” and while the TSNLA is well placed to act as the representative of third sector providers, it needs a rallying call for organisations to come together to speak up so they can say to the agencies “you need to do something about...” “or” you need to be aware of...”

The agencies have agreed to consider the finalised messages to come from Dialogue 1 and publish an initial response ahead of Dialogue 2 in November; where representatives from the Skills Funding Agency, the YPLA, BIS and the Learning & Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) will discuss and explore ways forward with third sector stakeholders. There are a few places left on the Strategic Dialogue 2 event being held on the 18 of November in London. Book your place by emailing john.harris@tsnla.org.uk.

For more on the Strategic Dialogues visit the TSNLA website at www.tsnla.org.uk/news/book-our-strategic-dialogues.

The Dialogue 1 event was attended by Jayne Quantrill, Learning and Skills Development Officer for the Forward Communities project. For further information on the project visit www.oneeastmidlands.org.uk/forward-communities or email jquantrill@one-em.org.uk.



The Third Sector National Learning Alliance (TSNLA) is a growing, national alliance of voluntary and community organisations and social enterprises involved in learning and skills. It aims to provide a coherent national ‘voice’ from and for third sector providers across departments and other important bodies.

Protocol with the Skills Funding Agency

A significant step forward in the strategic relationship between the TSNLA and the Skills Funding Agency was achieved in agreeing and signing a protocol between the two agencies. This ensures that the views of third sector providers will be taken account of through the ‘voice’ provided by the TSNLA on behalf of the members and wider sector.



One East Midlands is a registered charity, working with the voluntary and community sector.

One East Midlands brings together organisations that support voluntary and community groups across the region to influence and shape policy, improve services and provide a single point of contact for all stakeholders at a regional and national level.

One East Midlands is accountable to its members: voluntary and community organisations, frontline groups, public and private sector agencies. Through its membership, the sector is able to influence One East Midlands' work and ensure that the organisation does what it sets out to do.

For more information on our membership scheme visit the website: **www.oneeastmidlands.org.uk**

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