



Nottinghamshire Infrastructure Consortium

Better support for the voluntary and community sectors in the county and city



Nottinghamshire Voluntary Sector Infrastructure Consortium

Working Smarter Report

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CONTENTS

Introduction		2
Background		3
Key Findings		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Live issues for infrastructure organisations 	7
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceived gaps in service provision 	11
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills and expertise in consortium 	13
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specialist infrastructure provision 	16
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nottinghamshire Infrastructure Consortium 	17
Recommendations		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Filling the gaps for service user groups 	20
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How infrastructure organisations work together 	24
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The future of the Nottinghamshire Infrastructure Consortium 	26
Conclusion		28
Appendix 1		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members interviewed 	29
Appendix 2		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • JRA Report 	available on request

INTRODUCTION

This report marks one stage in a longer journey for the Nottinghamshire Infrastructure Consortium. It brings together the findings of 20 individual interviews with Consortium members over the summer of 2006 and additional material from Consortium workshops between October 2005 and January 2007.

The report was written by Barbara-Anne Walker, Director of Self Help Nottingham and Consortium member and Clive La Court of MTL consulting.

Throughout the report the Consortium is referred to as both "the Consortium" and "we". This is an explicit recognition that the Consortium has ownership of Working Smarter which has been fundamental to the positive impact of the process to date. It does not imply that every member agrees with the totality of the findings or the recommendations.

It is necessary to acknowledge the substantial contribution of many members of the Consortium, both past and present, to Working Smarter. Without the time, willingly given, to be interviewed, to provide databases and to take part in Consortium meetings, the Working Smarter project would not have happened. This report would be much the poorer had it not been for the willingness of senior staff from local infrastructure organisations to fully participate in the process. It is clear that we share a common commitment to providing infrastructure which enables all voluntary and community sector organisations across Nottingham and Nottinghamshire to operate most effectively. This alone gives us a strong foundation for moving forward and for optimising the impact of ChangeUp between now and 2014.

Note - this report includes examples of current work which is being carried out by Consortium members and quotations taken from interviews with Consortium members. It is important to state that these are only a few examples. This report maintains the commitment to confidentiality and anonymity which was set out in the original project plan and therefore examples and quotations are unattributed.

BACKGROUND TO THE WORKING SMARTER PROJECT

The Nottinghamshire Infrastructure Consortium was formally established in 2004. The original Infrastructure Investment Plan (IIP) dates from that year and has subsequently been revised. In 2004 and 2005 the Consortium focused on carrying out a range of project work, much of which has been highly informative or has improved infrastructure delivery and continues to inform discussions related to Working Smarter.

By late 2005 the Consortium had recognised that there was a need to take a more strategic view of future possibilities for infrastructure provision across the county and city and to begin to explore structural options for both generic and specialist infrastructure.

We set out our commitment to the provision of better infrastructure for the voluntary and community sector in both the City and County which:

- Is demonstrably fit for purpose in both service delivery and structure
- Is needs led and sustainable
- Responds to a range of identified needs
- Works within the wider policy context locally, regionally and nationally
- Avoids duplication
- Responds to identified gaps in current provision
- Is efficient and demonstrates value for money

A process was agreed in October 2005 with the overarching title of Working Smarter to run until March 2007. The plan initially pulled together three Change Up Window 3 project proposals: Working Smarter, Funding Infrastructure and Understanding Customer Needs and aimed to:

- Build on work previously done by the Consortium
- Link with Change Up Window 1 and 2 bids which were already progressing
- Further develop the Consortium as a strategic think tank for VCS infrastructure across County and City
- Address funders expressed needs and vision and actively engage them in the process

- Enable the Consortium to move forward through Window 3, into Capacity Builders and to develop a vision, consensus and agreed way forward with funders about the future options for infrastructure provision and service delivery in Nottinghamshire

At the onset of this work, the Consortium made an explicit commitment to work in partnership and the Working Smarter process was intended to enable us:

- To work more effectively together
- To develop a shared vision and values
- To acknowledge shared and individual strengths
- To understand each other's needs and concerns in order to support each other better and to be able to challenge each other constructively.

In practical terms that encompassed:

- Scoping what is already provided
- Identifying gaps in infrastructure provision for service user groups
- Identifying ways in which Consortium members could "Work Smarter"
- Exploring the concepts of generalist and specialist infrastructure
- Identifying possible project pathways for the future

The Working Smarter process was not envisaged to come to an end in March 2007 - the Consortium simply identified the first steps in what will be a longer journey. The bids which we made to Capacity Builders for 06/07 and 07/08 and the project work which is happening at the moment have deliberately been identified as part of our overall Working Smarter approach.

Working Smarter Interviewees

It is worth pointing out that the findings do not capture the views of every member of the Consortium. 19 members took part in the interviews, the meetings and/or the market research, although all had the opportunity to do so at the various stages. Of those who did actively engage with the process, they do represent the wide diversity of Consortium members in terms of organisational size, geographical catchments area, infrastructure provision, specialist and generalist activity focus, and attitudes to direct service provision.

A list of Consortium members who were interviewed for this project is given in Appendix 1.

Market Research

As part of the Working Smarter project, the Consortium engaged the services of an agency to carry out market research with our service user groups. 15 infrastructure organisations provided their databases and 485 groups responded to the survey which was carried out by telephone during August and September 2006.

The individual numbers from each organisations database were sometimes relatively few since only a proportion of each database was used but the findings do offer useful information about patterns of usage across both voluntary and statutory sector provision, what groups anticipate their future needs to be and where they want to access infrastructure services from.

The final report is attached as available from NIC or downloadable from <http://eastmidlandsinfrastructure.org.uk/consortia/nottinghamshire.asp> 2 . Individual organisations have been offered specific feedback about their findings.

Underlying areas of consensus

The Consortium has always operated with the fundamental ethos that how members relate to one another, work together and design infrastructure provision should all be predicated on what is best for the groups who use the services.

An important early resolution was to set out our commitment to service provision at district level and this decision was borne out by the market research findings which show an expressed preference from 68% of respondents for accessing infrastructure service from a city or district-wide organisation.

It is important to recognise that the framework behind this kind of district “shop face” may cover a range of models.

Over the course of the work to date a consensus has emerged about shared principles across the Consortium membership:

- Working Smarter must be about efficiency, value for money and effectiveness (in balance)
- It is also about equality and being inclusive
- Proposals for future provision need to be sustainable
- Working Smarter is not about change for its own sake - but change is inevitable
- Infrastructure should be funded in its own right but linked to clearly defined outputs and outcomes
- We can improve how infrastructure is organised and delivered at a structural level
- We can improve how infrastructure is organised and delivered at the level of our own organisations
- What we do must be evidence driven - form must follow function - and we must continue to move forward in response to a changing environment
- It has a long timescale for a long process
- We need to include service user groups and funders in the process
- It is as much about what we are good at as about what we need to improve
- Building and maintaining relationships within the Consortium is a vital part of continuing to move forward.

This is about how we work together to achieve best practice in infrastructure provision and will be addressed further towards the end of this report.

KEY FINDINGS

Key Findings 1 - live issues for infrastructure organisations:

Funding for infrastructure

“Core funding remains the Achilles heel of CVSs”

Most of the interviewees (though not all) said that they are struggling to attract and maintain funding purely for infrastructure services. They talked about the need to achieve an appropriate mix of funding and identified four challenges:

- The need to have a diverse funding base to avoid over-dependence on one funder, for example, a local authority. The subsequent benefits can be negated however by the increased administrative resources necessary to monitor and manage separate funding streams
- The importance of entering into longer term funding agreements which facilitate greater organisational security and planning - this is a significant concern for the sector as a whole
- Difficulties in identifying and securing core funding to meet operational costs and overheads, far less attracting investment income to develop organisational capacity
- The continuing trend towards project-related funding which can be resource intensive in terms of management and administration can raise issues about team fragmentation and an ongoing tension in the need to find the appropriate balance between direct service provision and infrastructure provision. The organisations which do take on service provision often do it in order to fund infrastructure services, but if the proportion is too much in the direction of service provision then it can be perceived as, or become, a change of role.

A small number of organisations have taken steps to address concerns about being pulled away from their core purpose. One example is the development and use of a “direction checker” which sets out a series of questions about how the proposed piece of work fits with identified strategic objectives. It also explores the potential impact of the work on different service user populations such as rural communities and older people.

Changes in funders configurations such as the recent County PCT re-organisation are not only unsettling but also necessitate new rounds of building relationships with new groups of Commissioners and educating them about the role and value of infrastructure. Both the City and County Council have been undergoing internal restructuring which will impact on the

voluntary sector as a whole. Consortium members have to respond to these changes in terms of the impact on our own funding and in our role to support the service user groups who also receive funding from these bodies.

A similar set of challenges come from the periodic changes in funding streams such as the Big Lottery and, for the work of the Consortium, Change Up/ Capacity Builders.

Discussion about infrastructure organisations engaging in service provision brings a number of challenges, not least that they may be tendering for a service in direct competition with those to whom they provide services and who may be represented on their trustee board. This can be partially addressed if organisations are explicit and transparent about what they are tendering or bidding for and why.

"There can be a conflict of interest over infrastructure and service providing. We walk a tightrope... You need to be clear that you are an infrastructure organisation and you are doing service provision. (Our) committee is made up of service provider organisations so we were competing against those organisations... we are just completely transparent."

"The Infrastructure Consortium needs to look at this 'stickiness'"

A different issue in relation funding was the reluctance of some interviewees to hold back from taking on pieces of work or bidding to provide infrastructure services where there are gaps because of a concern about being perceived as "taking over", either by other infrastructure providers or by service user groups.

"It's politics! There is a history of people worrying that we will take over so we haven't and we have shot ourselves in the foot sometimes."

It was generally felt that the development and implementation of consistent quality measures for infrastructure provision which are tied to funding would be a positive step forward.

There was also a clear sense that the Consortium needs to develop better relationships with key funders and to market our collective work and achievements to date more effectively.

Demand from Service User Groups

The majority of interviewees said that they were struggling to respond to demand from service user groups which was increasing and also changing.

There was a widespread feeling that fire fighting was displacing any capacity for prevention work. There were a few exceptions to this view although challenges about the impact of a lack of resources on the capacity to respond to customer need is a shared concern across the Consortium.

“VCOs come too late - because of a funding crisis or a change in manager or committee. Some need quick interventions but others will need longer-term support. Diagnosis is key.”

“There is no radical change in most groups needs, the key issue is the supply-side response and changes in funding streams and priorities”

Representation

All interviewees cited the increasing demand from statutory funders for them to engage in partnership work or forums. There is no clear agreement on appropriate representation of service user groups or of infrastructure organisations at strategic levels in partnership settings.

Several consultees felt that there was evidence of duplication and confusion between various networks and consultation mechanisms at District and sub-regional level. This seems to reflect various structures being put in place to facilitate community engagement and participation in renewal and public sector service delivery (Community Empowerment Networks, Neighbourhood Management Committees, Area Forums, Local Area Partnerships etc) alongside other structures intended to enhance VCS capability and networking such as the Voluntary Sector Open Forum and the Nottinghamshire Infrastructure Consortium. Moreover, new partnership and consultation arrangements at neighbourhood level are also being developed by agencies such as the Police.

Specialist provision

The Consortium has a range of specialist infrastructure provision within its membership. There is a recognition of the value of specialist organisations - especially (but not exclusively) from the specialist organisations themselves.

Future options for models of specialist provision include familiar hub and spoke arrangements - but there was an expressed concern that resources are focused primarily on the spokes rather than the hub.

“Hub and spoke can work well but you have to watch it. It can end up doing nothing to build the capacity of local organisations.”

Community Development

This issue was raised by a number of interviewees particularly in relation to competing with funders, especially Local Authorities who also describe themselves as doing community development work, although in practice the term is not always used to describe similar or equivalent activity. It has been discussed on a number of occasions at Consortium meetings and it is important to recognise that relationships are better in some areas than others.

It is clear that both voluntary and public sector Community Development Workers play a key role in terms of supporting community engagement with LSPs and targeting support in the deprived wards. Similarly infrastructure agencies provide effective mechanisms for engaging frontline groups and communities of interest. A key issue here may be the need for greater clarity about the different roles and responsibilities that make up Community Development work and for shared definitions and a shared language which can inform protocols for working arrangements.

“The Local Authority wants a more hands on role in community engagement.”

“We need more clarity about the roles and responsibilities of Community Development Workers. Communication, claiming credit and blame remain tricky issues.”

KEY FINDINGS

Key Findings 2 - Perceived gaps in service provision

1. **ICT for small service user groups** - Purple Zebra was recognised as providing useful support for many groups but not for the smallest who cannot afford the fees
2. **Group development and training** - some interviewees (and districts) expressed this need more than others but there is a lack of consistency across the Consortium area which needs to be addressed. A number of respondents identified the need for more “handholding” for smaller or more vulnerable service user groups
3. **Health and Safety** - this was also identified as a need for interviewees’ own organisations and is about both developing policies and keeping up with legislative requirements as service providers and as employers/ volunteer managers
4. **Governance** - the need for training and development to support trustees or management committee members was a common theme. This also extends to parish councillors
5. **More HR and employment advice** - the service provided by CA Plus was well respected but it needs to be more widely available
6. **Funding advice** - similar to group development, the capacity to provide service user groups with support in fundraising is patchy
7. **Workforce development** - the work of Enable and of a number of CVSs is acknowledged in the area of workforce development but opportunities are still limited
8. **BME engagement in North Notts** - this was cited by interviewees from all parts of the Consortium area as a major gap
9. **Consistent entry mechanisms and signposting/ brokerage for service user groups** - the aspiration is that any service user group approaching any infrastructure agency will be signposted to the most appropriate for their needs. This begins to raise issues of competition and trust within the Consortium which are addressed later in this report.

Interviewees were asked about duplication, but where it was identified it was primarily about badly organised provision which needed to be reviewed rather than there being acute or widespread duplication in organisational provision. It is important to acknowledge that what looks good on paper isn't always what works best on the ground and that duplication can be necessary if the benefits outweigh the costs. As well as offering a choice to service user groups, for many aspects of infrastructure one-to-one

interaction matters as does local branding and local knowledge and some degree of duplication is likely to be necessary to provide this.

"If clients are paying, they have lots of choice, that makes sense. When it's free or subsidised by grants, duplication seems a waste but there are arguments to offer choice... Funders need to be aware of the value of a local face. Cheaper is not the same as cost effective."

Some duplication is not only inevitable because of the nature of the voluntary sector and its service provision but may also be desirable if it yields net benefits for service user groups. A degree of duplication would provide choice as well as opportunities for local branding and maximising local knowledge.

The question of necessary duplication is also important in defining the roles of specialist infrastructure organisations.

"(need to)...look at how specialist infrastructure works with generalist. Do specialist do generalist work with specialist groups or specialised technical work with generalist groups?"

KEY FINDINGS

Key Findings 3 - Skills and expertise we already have in the Consortium

The idea of developing and sharing specialist expertise more broadly was a key feature of the model put forward in the original Infrastructure Investment Plan and it remains fundamental to the Working Smarter concept.

The interviews identified a number of areas with potential for shared learning, although this is by no means a finite list and the future work of the Consortium will bring more to light. The following twelve areas of expertise seem to combine clearly recognisable skill sets with a potential for sharing more widely within the sector:

1. **Funding advice** - as identified earlier, this is patchy but there are a small number of generalist and specialist organisations who do provide a tailored funding advice service including Newark and Sherwood CVS, Self Help Nottingham and Nottingham CVS.
2. **Database development** - the experience of pulling together a number of databases for the Market Research work indicated just how varied database management skills are across the Consortium. It also confirmed that each organisation's databases share a large number of the same contacts. Discussions with funders and VCOs in the City and conurbations suggest there is a push to explore how best to merge and rationalise databases not just amongst the voluntary sector but also with large complex organisations such as a local authorities. There is certainly scope for achieving economies of scale and for a more organised approach to database management on behalf of the Consortium.
3. **ICT support and virtual provision** - there is expertise and knowledge of ICT and practical applications in generalist member organisations as well as specialist social enterprises such as Purple Zebra. Some Consortium members are highly skilled in this area and are pro-actively using ICT whilst others lack the capacity or knowledge to move much beyond the basics. This breadth of capacity and knowledge is reflected in the areas of website development and information management.
4. **Website development and management** - there are both generalist and specialist Consortium members who have skills in the design, content specification and management of websites. As with ICT support, this was identified as an area which merited further work both for the effective operation of infrastructure organisations and for service user groups.
5. **Staff development and training and leadership development** - there has already been some Consortium project work which addressed the need for leadership development and succession planning. In addition to Enable's specialist provision, there are examples (Mansfield CVS, Bassetlaw CVS) of

both the provision of training for employed staff and of organisational development opportunities as part of an overall programme for service user groups which infrastructure organisations can access. The CVSs in South Nottinghamshire have formed the South Notts Alliance and are offering a programme of joint training under that umbrella.

Some members, such as Hostels Liaison Group, have set up training opportunities for their own staff and opened them up to other organisations in order to make them affordable. All of these models offer ways in which the Consortium can collaborate to ensure that all staff and volunteers have the skills which they need to function effectively.

6. Neighbourhood/ parish planning - the RCC is explicitly charged with ensuring the delivery of parish planning processes in rural areas. In addition, there are CVSs and other Consortium members who have extensive experience of providing services to rural populations. Neighbourhood working has become a common feature in urban areas and CVSs including Mansfield and Nottingham have built up a body of knowledge and skills which could be more effectively shared and applied collectively and in partnership.

7. Feedback from service users - user feedback activities (across the Consortium) range from none to highly refined systems, such as that used by Rushcliffe CVS, which track the impact of infrastructure support on each service user group from a baseline position. Given that the Consortium has expressed an interest in progressing the idea of minimum standards related to funding of infrastructure services, this is an important area for further development and sharing of best practice.

8. Information management and dissemination - this was not just about managing the volume of information, but its quality and the means by which it is communicated. The range of newsletters across the Consortium was recognised as being of variable quality in terms of style and presentation and there was a clear sense that members are regularly reproducing the same information which is then received by a large proportion of our service user groups from a number of different sources.

Whilst locally branded newsletters will continue to be an important element of service provision, the current approach is neither efficient nor cost effective. There may be scope for more carefully defining roles in relation to information - originator, provider/distributor, broker, gateway etc - as a way of becoming more efficient at information management.

9. Strategic involvement/ planning/ public policy and public sector contracting -both generalist and specialist organisations across the Consortium have local, regional and national experience of working with public sector agencies to develop their understanding of how to work more effectively with the voluntary sector and of supporting service user groups to tender for public sector contracts. Nottingham CVS have a change management team which is working to bring together clusters of voluntary organisations for tendering purposes.

10. Sustainable funding models - some Consortium members have been actively involved in supporting the development of social enterprises and supporting groups to develop sustainable funding models. CA Plus has also been supporting groups and providing training to use Full Cost Recovery frameworks.

Purple Zebra is a successful example of a social enterprise which emerged from an infrastructure partnership.

11. Transport - working with communities to address their transport needs is explicitly part of the service provision of some Consortium member organisations. This also links into working with LSPs and other regeneration partnerships and both are key skills which are particularly well developed by the CVSs and the RCC.

12. Managing community venues - this concerns the effective management of village halls and other community settings in rural areas as well as meeting a growing need for expertise in managing urban neighbourhood venues. Faith communities also have specific needs in relation to buildings management and all of these have necessitated the development of skills and knowledge to varying degrees across the Consortium.

KEY FINDINGS

Key Findings 4 - Specialist Infrastructure Provision

The Consortium has within its membership a wide range of specialist infrastructure provision. The list includes:

- BME communities
- Rural communities
- Accountancy
- HR
- Self help and mutual support groups
- Homelessness
- Faith groups
- Workforce development.

It would be useful for the Consortium to consider how we define specialist infrastructure. As previously indicated, the list above encompasses specialist organisations which do generalist work with specialist service user groups, and generalist organisations which do specialist work with generalist service user groups.

In practice, generic and specialist provision are not neatly separated and (arguably) should not be. But it is unlikely that they can realistically be fully integrated either. If we subscribe to the idea that form follows function, we have to be open to a range of options for the totality of infrastructure provision. It is important to state explicitly that Working Smarter cannot only apply to generic infrastructure provision.

Some questions with regard to specialisms will be answered by the range of project work which the Consortium plans to undertake in the future but it is important that consideration is given to this aspect of infrastructure provision within the wider framework.

KEY FINDINGS

Key Findings 5 - Nottinghamshire Infrastructure Consortium

It is fair to say that interviewees shared a sense of disappointment and unfulfilled potential in relation to the functioning of the Consortium to date but it is also important to recognise that most felt that there was still an opportunity for it to evolve more positively in the near future.

Key issues to emerge from the consultation process were:

- **Funders** - our collective relationship with funders is key and requires urgent further development. This will be a necessary foundation of our ability to take ChangeUp further. We must establish professional and adult relationships with the range of public sector agencies which provide core funding to infrastructure agencies, currently District, City and County Councils and PCTs. This is further complicated by the need to maintain relationships across different directorates within these agencies and with officers and elected/non-executive members. Working together more effectively as a Consortium and agreeing a collective approach will enable us to support funders to achieve better and more effective planning of provision across sectors and an improved alignment of resource allocation.
- **Strategy** - there is a need for the Consortium to act more strategically, to be a collective voice and a place for constructive dialogue. This was cited generally but also in particular connection with the relationship with funders, rural issues and BME engagement in North Nottinghamshire. It is a pre-requisite to real and substantial improvements in infrastructure provision.
- **Consultation and engagement** - the opportunity for the Consortium to develop into a reference point which could facilitate consultation and engagement with infrastructure organisations was generally, though not universally, popular. This links very closely with the previous point about a strategic approach and with questions about subsidiarity which are raised later in this report. If we are to maintain clarity for ourselves and for other agencies, we must come to an explicit agreement about this issue and where any boundaries lie.
- **Communication** - it was widely agreed that levels of communication and understanding between Consortium members could always be improved. Factors which affect communication include staff/ volunteer/trustee turnover, ongoing development of new services and delivery mechanisms and changes in context/ environment (e.g. Local Government white paper). These are unlikely to diminish and we must find ways to keep channels of communication open whilst operating in an unstable environment. There was recognition of an explicit link between

innovation and communication on the one hand and sharing good practice and experience on the other.

The appointment of a Co-ordinator is a positive step forward in this area and is already having an impact.

- **Dealing with tension** - most interviewees felt that while there were inevitably tensions amongst members from time to time, not least in terms of trying to attract and retain funding these can usually be resolved with good will or better communications. There was not felt to be a general climate of competition, suspicion or ill-feeling between most infrastructure organisations. It was acknowledged, however, that there were instances where difficulties arose and there had been mixed results in terms of resolving any differences.
- **North/South Nottinghamshire** - for some members the sense of a North/South division in the Consortium was palpable and negative perceptions about how funding decisions were made acted to reinforce these concerns
- **Capacity** - all interviewees struggled to find the capacity to engage with the Consortium much beyond attending the occasional meeting and reading emails but it should be noted that there was no great sense that the frequency of meetings etc was perceived to be excessive. Most felt that the meetings were generally useful. The Consortium Coordinator will play an important role here in finding ways to re-engage those members who are less involved at present.
- **IIP** -the original Infrastructure Investment Plan was universally seen as a disappointment and a major setback. This is clearly still having an impact on perceptions of the Consortium and its work.
- **Trustees** - many interviewees were concerned that the Consortium had not adequately engaged trustees in its work and saw this as a valuable opportunity for development
- **Unresolved issues** - concerns were expressed that that the Consortium has often shied away from some of the “thornier” issues, particularly when the first Infrastructure Investment Plan did not deliver as hoped. Examples include our past unwillingness to address questions related to duplication of provision and the subsequent competition for funding and the ongoing unresolved issues re community development.
- **Community Development** - this has been cited as an area of concern elsewhere in this report. Work to develop shared definitions and language would benefit voluntary and statutory providers with a view to establishing protocols for future provision of the range of potential community development interventions.

- **Project Coordinator** - the recruitment of a Project Coordinator was welcomed by most interviewees as an opportunity to bring a project management resource into the Consortium which can ensure co-ordination and avoid duplication. Mo Cooper has been in post since November 2006 and the positive effect of her work is clear.

No matter how skilled our coordinator, however, it is our own goodwill and farsightedness which will ensure that this work makes a difference to those groups who use our services. The Consortium is built upon a web of relationships and if these are to be successfully maintained we, as individual members, must be willing to trust, to take risks and to be open to constructive challenge about our own provision.

RECOMMENDATIONS - 1

Filling the gaps for service user groups

From the work done to date, it is possible to identify a list of gaps in service provision to be taken forward by Consortium working groups to map what is already happening, identify best practice and set out recommendations for future provision. These areas are in:

- Funding advice
- Information management
- Database management
- Governance
- ICT support for small service user groups
- Website development and management
- Group development
- Health and Safety
- BME engagement in North Nottinghamshire
- Consistent entry mechanisms and signposting/ brokerage to appropriate
- Organisations for service user groups.

Work in a number of these areas is already being progressed including governance support, which is being taken forward by Volunteering Nottinghamshire; work on funding advice being managed by Newark and Sherwood CVS and BME engagement in North Nottinghamshire which is the subject of a BASIS bid by Mansfield CVS in collaboration with the other North Notts CVSs.

A basic model for progressing in each of these areas was identified in the original Working Smarter project plan in October 2005:

- Map current provision and planning mechanisms and supply chain options

- Set out evaluation criteria
- Establish testable models for infrastructure provision with fully worked up project plans and funding proposals
- Implement the models.
- Evaluate with service users/ funders/ consortium members against previously agreed criteria.
- Revise models, and implement changes.

The exact specification for each piece of work will vary according to its particular needs but the principle of evidence-based models will always apply and will be particularly important, for example, when defining necessary duplication.

Some of these areas will benefit from mapping services wider than those provided by the Consortium and the wider voluntary sector. We know anecdotally that the statutory sector provide some infrastructure services to groups and this was borne out by the market research results. It forms a small proportion of provision in comparison to the voluntary sector but is still a significant provider.

The framework for infrastructure provision

As work takes place to address the gaps listed above, the shape of infrastructure provision will begin to change. However it is necessary to place on record that the Consortium as a whole and each of its individual members have a range of options to consider in response to the Working Smarter project and the other projects which come under the ChangeUp/Capacitybuilders umbrella. The options range from maintaining the current status quo - no change - to a complete re-organisation of the entire voluntary sector infrastructure across the City and County.

In practice the choice of no change is not a viable one for either the Consortium or for many of its members, if only because we have already set out a commitment to provide services which best meet the need of our service user groups alongside a recognition of areas where our work can and should improve.

There is also the option of making only marginal or incremental change in operating practices while retaining the existing structure and networking of VCS provision. The very earliest Working Smarter proposals recognised that this is not sustainable and substantive change is inevitable - however it must always be driven by clearly evidenced opportunities to improve infrastructure provision to service user groups.

Additionally there are external factors which cannot be ignored, including pressure from local funders and from national bodies who want to make more explicit commitments to funding particular infrastructure services.

Change is therefore unavoidable and desirable and it will impact at different levels in infrastructure provision. There must be both:

- Operational change - about doing things differently in terms of the way an organisation works or a service is delivered at the organisational level
- Structural change - more fundamental or holistic change in the way infrastructure is organised, resourced and delivered at the different spatial levels of neighbourhood, district, county, and region.

It is important to underline that these approaches are not mutually exclusive. We need to work on both in parallel throughout the ChangeUp/Capacitybuilders process and the relative emphasis to be given to each will be an ongoing challenge for the Consortium as a whole and for individual member organisations.

The Consortium has always been committed to district level provision of infrastructure services and this decision has been affirmed by the market research findings. How the district level services are actually organised will necessarily be informed by the key driver behind the Working Smarter initiative that form follows function; we identify first and most importantly

what the pattern of provision should be and then design the structure to provide it.

This opens up a continuum of structural possibilities from a small local “shop front” comprising only reception staff and a strategic partnership role (“chief executive”) with a range of central hubs providing local services, to the development of district level “super infrastructure organisations” as sole providers of all local infrastructure. Both of these possibilities were raised by a number of interviewees. Some suggested that the current arrangements, though not perfect, are the most appropriate given the size and structure of the county - ‘if it ain’t broke don’t fix it’. Others feel there is scope to consider ‘scaling-up’ generic infrastructure provision in order to establish fewer generic infrastructure organisations, operating across larger geographic areas, and serving larger numbers of front line groups. There is a balance that must be found between cost-minimisation and necessary duplication of provision.

The actual model we adopt will probably be somewhere in the middle of the continuum, but it will be chosen depending on factors such as service demand, staff development needs and value for money. We need to ensure a level of consistent provision across all parts of the City and County but this may be modelled differently depending on needs of service users, on current provision and on cost-effectiveness. This is where something that looks like duplication can actually bring added value and should be able to be evidenced on that basis.

There is no doubt that rationalising infrastructure into fewer organisations could yield considerable resource savings through reduced overheads and improved operational efficiencies which could then be directed into capacity-building and enhanced frontline service delivery provision. However there are limitations to economies of scale derived from serving larger and larger areas. The search must be for an optimum scope and scale of provision within the context of our stated commitment to district level services.

RECOMMENDATIONS -2

Areas for development in how infrastructure organisations work together:

1. **'Back office' organisational support functions** - such as provision of payroll, HR, Health and Safety and other required policies and procedures which impact on every organisation. This was raised frequently as an area to be explored although there was recognition that the scope to achieve some degree of rationalisation of this kind brings particular complexities and risks.
2. **Information management** - a majority of interviewees felt that it would be beneficial to explore how information management and research could be more efficiently organised, including through rationalisation and integration.
3. **Staff development opportunities** - there is a clearly identified need to offer wider staff development opportunities as in response to our own organisations' drives towards best practice. Staff accreditation may also be an appropriate element in setting out consistent standards which relate directly to funding for infrastructure.
4. **ICT** - to ensure consistent use of ICT as a tool in service provision and development across the county and city, taking account of the wide range of organisations and the resources they can make available to such technology.
5. **Web Portal** - this has already been proposed and is currently being scoped. It is envisaged that the portal will be a central point of access to a variety of online resources for information and support as well as to the individual websites of Consortium members and other providers. There is the possibility of developing a "members area" for the specific use of the Consortium to share resource and information amongst members.
6. **Governance** - there is widespread recognition of the need to work with trustees of infrastructure organisations themselves not only to ensure they are fulfilling their charitable responsibilities of good governance, but also to engage them in the work of the Consortium.
7. **Consistency in quality of service** - developing quality measures or forms of accreditation for infrastructure and working with funders to link them directly to funding. By demonstrating the added value of infrastructure through measured evidence we can influence funders and other stakeholders in their support of our infrastructure activity.
8. **Support with change management** - there is limited experience and expertise in successfully planning, organising and securing change to the extent that is likely to be proposed over the next five to ten years. A number of interviewees felt that a third party 'honest broker' could facilitate more successful change if they possessed the relevant expertise

and had the trust of the key parties involved. Such a service could maximise the potential of the Consortium as a whole and of its individual members by working in conjunction with relevant stakeholders.

9. Support to develop collaborative working with non-VCS infrastructure providers - this includes developing a shared understanding of the necessary range of community development provision, but also encompasses the potential for sharing information and making best use of the points of contact which service user groups access across both sectors.

The Consortium has already decided on the initial priorities from this list (and from the earlier list of gaps for service user groups) within the limitations of existing funding and work is already taking place or is being planned for 2007-8. The remaining recommendations must be kept under review in the short and medium term along with other areas for development which will materialise as we progress.

RECOMMENDATIONS - 3

The future of the Nottinghamshire Infrastructure Consortium

Ownership by members

It is useful to remind ourselves that the Consortium was formed in response to a national initiative to improve the quality and coverage of infrastructure provision. Whatever the external context the Consortium cannot exist or operate without the consent and participation of its members.

"We don't want a mini United Nations."

As stated in the first part of this report, the membership of the Consortium agreed in 2005 to the commitment which was set out in the Working Smarter project plan - the provision of better infrastructure for the voluntary and community sector in both the City and County which:

- Is demonstrably fit for purpose in both service delivery and structure
- Is needs led and sustainable
- Responds to a range of identified needs
- Works within the wider policy context locally, regionally and nationally
- Avoids duplication
- Responds to identified gaps in current provision
- Is efficient and demonstrate value for money.

There is an expressed desire for the Consortium to develop a vision but perhaps the basis for such a vision already exists in this shared purpose? This merits some further discussion and adjustment amongst members and if it is deemed to be appropriate could usefully be formally adopted by the Consortium.

A related discussion and subsequent explicit agreement about shared values would be an additional expression of the commitment of members to work in partnership to achieve the vision.

Consent

Each member of the Nottinghamshire Infrastructure Consortium is an autonomous body. Each of us has a board of trustees or directors or a management committee with responsibilities to govern in the best interests of the organisation's beneficiaries and within the terms of its constitution. The Consortium's operations cannot and should not attempt to compromise this requirement.

That does not mean that member organisations cannot use the Consortium as a vehicle to work in partnership; indeed if the Consortium formally adopts a common purpose which explicitly guides its work then there is potential for added value to the governance structures of each member organisation. This reinforces the need to build upon work which has already begun to actively engage trustees in the work of the Consortium.

Subsidiarity

The Consortium has had some approaches to act as a single portal for engagement with infrastructure. There is felt to be a risk that we could be viewed as a 'short cut' to genuine engagement with the voluntary sector. It is necessary for us to reach a consensus about representation and about how decisions are made. This could usefully be informed by mapping out who currently sits on what strategic groupings and with what mandate.

The principle of subsidiarity is one which has been raised by Consortium members previously and further exploration can only be of benefit to our work. Given the point above about the autonomy and independence of members, it is important for the Consortium to be transparent about what informs decisions about the lowest effective level at which provision should be structured and managed.

The idea of working in partnership is built on the premise that we can achieve more by working together than we can separately. Adoption of the principle of subsidiarity also implies a ceding of some decision making to the Consortium in turn where that is the most appropriate way to achieve the vision and access resources - for example work on quality accreditation of infrastructure which is directly linked to funding.

If we are to adopt subsidiarity as a working concept then it needs to be discussed, agreed and used as an active tool in informing decision making processes.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The findings and recommendations of the Working Smarter project have been considered and discussed at a number of recent Consortium meetings. This has shaped the final version of this document and it has also resulted in some initial project work being implemented.

It is worth noting that the actual process of carrying out the Working Smarter project, primarily the interviews and workshops with members, played an important role in beginning to move the Consortium to a more positive and forward looking place. Significantly, we have committed to developing a shared vision and exploring the concept of subsidiarity during February and March 2007. It is hoped that this report will support the work of the Consortium and prompt continued positive developments.

The appointment of Mo Cooper as coordinator will continue to have a significant effect on our membership and on our productivity. Her project management skills will enable us to achieve targets and maintain a strategic overview of developments. However it is not Mo's role to make any of the recommendations contained in this report a reality. That responsibility belongs to us.

Barbara-Anne Walker
Clive LaCourt

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Nottinghamshire Voluntary Sector Infrastructure Consortium

Working Smarter Report

Appendix 1: Interviewees

Margaret Allsop Ashfield Volunteer Bureau

Ian Bradford Rushcliffe Council for Voluntary Service

Tyrone Brown African Caribbean Development Agency

Sharon Clancy Mansfield Community and Voluntary Service

Tony Graham & Aneela Asim Nottingham Black Partnership

Claire Grainger Hostels Liaison Group

Don Hayes Enable

Julia Hughes Newark and Sherwood Council for Voluntary Service

Bob Middleton & Rachel Quinn Nottinghamshire Rural Community Council

Michael Newstead Bassetlaw Council for Voluntary Service

Jon North Networking Action with Voluntary Organisations

John O'Brien Community Accounting Plus

Patricia Stoa Diocese of Southwell

Mick Topliss Ashfield Links Forum

Helen Voce Nottingham Council for Voluntary Service

Barbara-Anne Walker Self Help Nottingham

Hilary Wells Beeston Volunteer Centre

Pam Wisner Gedling Council for Voluntary Service