

Social Justice

Review of Support Service Needs of Voluntary Organisations: Perceptions of Users and Providers

Rocket Science UK

This research was commissioned by the Scottish Executive, on behalf of the Strategic Funding Review (SFR) partners. The purpose of the research was to review the support available to the voluntary sector in relation to five core areas:

- organisational development
- workforce development
- technical support
- income generation
- lobbying and networking support

Key findings

- Voluntary sector organisations strongly identified income generation as their first priority for support. This was followed by organisational development and then workforce development.
- The need for support to build the capacity of management committees and boards was a recurring issue.
- The trend for voluntary organisations to move towards a business model gives rise to different types of support needs (for example business planning and more in-depth assistance, such as developing marketing strategies) and there are questions about who should provide this.
- There is a clear need for voluntary sector organisations to have greater access to certain core support services, particularly in relation to legal issues, human resources and employment legislation.
- The quality of support varies significantly across the country and between providers and there is a strong desire for improved quality assurance mechanisms.
- Voluntary organisations often access support to deal with immediate problems, as rather than those identified by systematic assessment of their support and development needs.
- The majority of support is paid for by voluntary organisations, with less than a quarter provided free of charge. A large majority of respondents reported that the external support they had used had provided value for money.

- Providers of support generally reported that their services are developed according to needs expressed (through both formal and informal methods) by recipients.
- The need for greater coordination of the support infrastructure was highlighted by recipients and providers of support. In particular, it appears that “traditional” voluntary sector providers, and those who have developed the role more recently, do not always co-ordinate their services to best effect.

Context

This review forms one element of the implementation of the SFR set up in 2003 to: *“maximise the contribution of voluntary organisations to the common good of Scotland by identifying, and making a shared commitment to resolve the cultural and practical issues relating to the funding of voluntary organisations that currently constrain them”*. The SFR reported in 2005 and a range of objectives have been identified to support the growth and development of the voluntary sector. The key themes underlying these objectives include: sustainability; efficiency; demonstrating impact and effectiveness; partnership working between voluntary and public sectors; and improvements to funding arrangements.

The voluntary sector has become increasingly central to Scottish and UK policy and there is now a growing emphasis on its role in the delivery of public services. The SFR has taken place in the context of a range of policies affecting the voluntary sector including: the Charity and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Act 2005 that followed the recommendations of the McFadden Commission; the Scottish Executive’s *Vision for the Voluntary Sector; Change Up*, the UK capacity building and infrastructure framework for the voluntary and community sector; the Scottish *Volunteering Strategy*; the Scottish Social Enterprise Strategy (currently out for consultation); and a range of policy agenda including best value, full cost recovery and equalities.

Detailed findings

Views of support recipients

Rocket Science undertook focus groups, interviews and an electronic survey with a broad range of voluntary organisations across Scotland. The research produced in-depth information which is discussed in detail in the full report. Some of the key issues were:

Support needs

- Participants strongly identified income generation as the first priority for support, followed by organisational development and then workforce development. In relation to income generation, support was needed to identify

funding sources and complete funding applications. In addition voluntary organisations anticipated that in the future they would need support to develop an income generation or funding strategy.

- The need for support for boards and management committees was a recurring issue that emerged throughout the review. This was identified as a key future support need in relation to organisational development and workforce development. Participants also highlighted the need for help for trustees to understand their financial management responsibilities.
- There are various issues about the types of support voluntary organisations require as they adopt a more businesslike model, including who should provide this support.
- Organisations tended not to have accessed a great deal of support with lobbying and networking and the priorities here related to support to engage at a local level with strategic partners and planning structures.
- Support accessed largely focussed on ‘fire fighting’ rather than those identified by a systematic identification of support required to facilitate the development of organisations.

Source and quality of provision

- Voluntary organisations access support from a range of sources depending on the support required. Commonly used sources include: local authorities, voluntary sector intermediaries, Councils for Voluntary Service (CVS), SCVO and private companies.
- Variability in the quality of support available was a key issue. There was a desire for greater quality control, including improved means for organisations to know that support will be of high quality before they commit time and money to it.
- The majority of support is paid for by voluntary organisations, with less than a quarter provided free of charge (help with income generation and networking is most likely to be free compared to other areas). A large majority of respondents reported that the external support they had used had provided value for money.

Future support

Participants commented on what support services ought to look like in the future and the key messages were that it needs to:

- Be well connected and co-ordinated;
- Be well promoted, accessible and help with the identification of support needs;
- Be locally relevant;
- Provide the appropriate skills and expertise;
- Be affordable and properly funded.

Views of support providers

The review included interviews and focus groups with providers of support to the voluntary sector. This covered a range of agencies including: CVS, SCVO, sector intermediaries, non-voluntary sector providers (e.g. Scottish Enterprise) and funding bodies.

- Voluntary sector providers generally reported that the support offered was developed according to needs expressed by recipients. This was achieved via ongoing contact with their stakeholders/members as well as through formal methods such as annual membership surveys. Non-voluntary sector providers provided a wide range of support and tended to describe this as being reactive (in response to expressed need) as opposed to being planned strategically.
- The impact of support tends to be evaluated through some form of survey (for example many intermediary bodies carry out an annual membership survey). However there was relatively little in-depth or systematic monitoring or assessment of impact. Organisations with membership fees have some degree of inbuilt monitoring as organisations will only continue to subscribe if they benefit from the services offered. Robust monitoring and evaluation of support provided was identified as an area where the capacity of support agencies themselves needs to be improved.
- Providers of support reported some co-ordination and a desire to avoid duplication. However there was a notable gap in links between support provided by traditional voluntary sector support providers and non-voluntary sector providers.

- Support providers (voluntary sector and non-voluntary sector) suggested that the support infrastructure is complex and that there needs to be greater clarity over respective roles and where these 'begin and end'.

Recommendations

The Recommendations of this review address a number of key themes:

- Capacity building for management committees and boards.
- Issues arising from the trend for voluntary organisations to move towards a business model, coupled with the growth and development of the social enterprise sector.
- The need for access to support with legal issues, particularly human resources and employment legislation.
- The relationship between traditional voluntary sector approaches to income generation (e.g. grants) and other approaches such as loans or trading activities.
- The need for greater coherence in the local and national support infrastructure (all providers), including greater joint working and a more effective signposting.
- Building on existing infrastructure and, in particular, developing the role of CVS.
- Measures to improve quality assurance and introduce greater accountability in support services.
- Immediate issues, including the lack of understanding of many voluntary organisations about public sector procurement and the imminent changes to the European Structural Funds (ESF).

About this study

- The review was carried out between April and June 2006. The methodology included: desk research; website for communication with stakeholders; survey and focus groups with recipients of support; interviews and focus groups with providers of support; stakeholder feedback workshop; and production of final report. Additional measures were taken in response to a low initial response rate from potential participants. Throughout the review Rocket Science worked with the Research Advisory Group set up by the Scottish Executive.

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This document and the research report which it summarises, “Review of Voluntary Sector Support Services: Perceptions of Users and Providers” is available on the Scottish Executive Social Research website <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/socialresearch> along with other Research Findings and Reports.

The site carries up-to-date information about social and policy research commissioned and published on behalf of the Scottish Executive. Subjects covered include transport, housing, social inclusion, rural affairs, children and young people, education, social work, community care, local government, civil justice, crime and criminal justice, regeneration, planning and women’s issues. The site also allows access to information about the Scottish Household Survey.



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