

Basildon, Billericay & Wickford Council for Voluntary Services (BBWCVS)

Registered Charity No. 802116

Supporting a Stronger Civil Society

This is the written response to the consultation document Supporting a Stronger Civil Society on behalf of the Basildon, Billericay & Wickford CVS.

We are an umbrella organisation that provides advice, information and development support services to voluntary and community organisations in the borough and have been operational since 1989. Affiliated to the National Association of Councils for Voluntary Service (NACVA) we are committed to undertake five core functions including development support and representation.

We host the Volunteer Centre that provides a volunteer recruitment, placement and support service to the local and business community of the borough including voluntary and community organisations seeking volunteers.

BBWCVS is governed by its members (voluntary and community groups operating within the Basildon District area), through an elected executive committee. The organisation currently has 92 members.

Response

In broad outlines we note and welcome the long term vision to promote social action, empower local communities, and open up public sector contracts to ensure that charities have a greater role in public service delivery.

We welcome the positive messages and evidence of the value of support and development organisations. For example, p.13 states that “evidence shows that those groups which do receive support report greater success in grant applications and have stronger local partnerships”. This is consistent with local findings from a recent fundraising project. In short, a project funded and commissioned by the PCT enabled local groups to secure over £650,000 new funding. This was more than ten times the original investment. This will enable local groups to employ additional staff, expand service provision and develop capacity.

Question 1 Online Services.

How can online services for frontline groups be improved?

As a CVS we recognise electronic communications is playing an increasingly important role in service delivery. Advances in communication technology are constant and fast moving. This will continue to have an impact on the way in which we communicate and on the design of services.

For us it will mean that members will be able to access materials such as good practice guides or policy briefings from numerous different sources. This is true not least because as the document states “there are already rich sources of online support available”.pg8.

However rather than invest time and resources in streamlining existing toolkits we believe more emphasis should be placed on how civil society can use online development to assist groups (reaching out to communities, mobilising support, sharing information, gathering feedback, increasing peer to peer learning and adapting services). Secondly, consideration needs to be given to the important role that civil society can have in promoting digital inclusion (or supporting those at risk of digital exclusion) in a country where ONS figures suggest only 65% of the population currently have access to the internet.

Question 2 Working with business.

What can government do to forge more effective links and transfer skills between small civil society organisations & businesses or larger charities?

We welcome the desire of the Government to forge more effective links between civil society and business. A number of initiatives are identified including skill transfers; employer supported volunteering, and other forms of pro bono support.

- Locally Essex County Council has encouraged employee supported volunteering and part funded local Volunteer Centres to act as brokers. This is welcome but the potential to transfer relevant skills remains barely tapped. For example, as a recently appointed Chief Officer it would have been interesting to shadow peers in other sectors to see how they perform their roles on a day to day basis. How do they manage remotely, and strategically?
- What about the possibility of shared/joint training events? Many of the courses provided currently in the sector can be prohibitively expensive particularly for small groups. Companies could open up their courses to enable limited free places to local groups.

In terms of skill transfers gaps are apparent in a number of areas within the sector such as IT skills; human resource management; and marketing. The private sector

has the potential to play an important role here whether through training, and/or structured pro bono advice and support.

Finally the document states that pro bono support “can be brokered, locally or by national organisations”. In our view any schemes developed would need to be delivered locally through established, tried and tested routes such as Volunteer Centres. However, across Essex all Volunteer Centres face funding difficulties. As a result capacity is limited and additional resources would be needed to enhance this function.

Questions 4, 5, 6 &7: Bursaries&Grants

No comments

Questions 8: Areas with weak social capital.

Are there ways that expert intervention can support areas which are lacking social capital to improve local relationships and develop a stronger civil society?

At the Basildon CVS we employ a Community Development Manager delivering a Fair Share Trust funded project in the Basildon and Billericay areas. The main objective of this project is to bring together the statutory and non statutory groups and organisations within local forums, engage local people to present and report on local needs and issues, bring local people together at community events, build community cohesion, disseminate key information and raise awareness of services available. It includes a commitment to develop youth provision to provide opportunities for young people to develop social skills, confidence and diversion from crime and anti social behaviour.

The success of the project has meant refunding has been secured until 2012. It has enabled the CVS to develop its capacity and the experience of providing a community development function. Useful learning opportunities are also available locally from the Southend CVS who host a team of community development workers.

It is recommended that the feasibility of developing this function is further explored. In this regard we welcome the development of a national programme for community development training. We believe that the current proposals lack ambition and that there is further scope to develop and improve this area of activity.

Ends:

For further information please contact Chris Evans, Chief Officer on 01268 294781 or by email chris@bbwcvcs.org.uk