

# OCS Consultation Session

Supporting a Stronger Civil Society is an Office for Civil Society consultation on improving support for frontline civil society organisations.

Working together Manchester Community Central and Community Network for Manchester (CN4M) held a meeting to enable voluntary and community groups and CN4M network members to consider the key questions and formulate a response. The following responses are a collective and not attributed to any one individual.

## Context

Manchester Community Central is the infrastructure Support Service for Manchester and through its database has access to over 2000 community and voluntary organisations.

Community Network for Manchester is an organisation with charitable status which specialises in enabling voluntary and community sector (VCS) groups to use their knowledge and understanding of local communities to make a difference in Manchester.

## Key documents

A PDF document of the OCS Consultation and this paper can be found at:

[www.manchestercommunitycentral.org/vcs-involvement/community-engagement](http://www.manchestercommunitycentral.org/vcs-involvement/community-engagement)

## Summary of discussions

### Q1: How can online services for frontline groups be improved?

It was commented that a number of online service providers exist. There is a need for a comprehensive search engine / comparison type website of online services that is available to front line groups.

- It was noted that this would be a huge task to undertake and the group felt that a representative from the voluntary and community sector should co-ordinate this and not a member of the local authority.

Are we too reliant on online services?

- a lot of websites exist but how do groups know where they all are and decide which is the best one?

Can we have some kind of user rating system?

- online services need to have a 'face to face' presence

- it needs to be acknowledged that not everyone has access to ICT equipment and / or the internet to use online services.

The following approaches were suggested;

- Wiki approach – community organisations upload their own information and take ownership  
Comments were made around “search” issues, filtering of the information and potential digital / age divide concerns. It is important that we learn from other examples of good practice in the region / country, and build on what we have.
- Form a national ‘One Central Point’ / Oracle that groups can access. (This may build upon the approach of One Central Place which exists in Manchester)
- Place ICT equipment in public / community projects with wifi access to allow groups to access to online services.
- Funding information – online updated information is helpful.
- A comprehensive database of local community groups to aid collaboration / partnership working, volunteering. (One Central Place – [www.onecentralplace.org](http://www.onecentralplace.org))

## **Q2: What can Government do to forge more effective links and transfer skills between small civil society organisations and businesses or larger charities?**

Don't interfere – leave small organisations to it.

Matching service developed - businesses to identify and list what they can offer to smaller organisations.

Similar scheme to 'Innospace' for VCS groups.

(Innospace is a Manchester Metropolitan University's business incubator for start up businesses and new enterprises who all share the same base)

Encourage networking – networks are an effective way of developing links and transferring skills which are often built over time, almost accidentally.

Creation of community spaces to include change in legislation for building use and assist groups to develop community space / sharing of resources.

Funding – make it a requirement for smaller organisations to be engaged in working with businesses or a larger charity.

Financial incentives – tax benefits.

Corporate Social Responsibility Transparency – Government has a role to play in ensuring businesses recognise CSR. Clear message to businesses regarding social responsibility.

Businesses to recognise what people are doing in the sector through volunteering and support employees to contribute to community and voluntary activity.

## **Q3: How could brokerage of pro bono support be improved?**

Take services to the clients rather than the client having to access the services.

Have someone who acts as a 'middle person' for groups to access pro bono support.

Financial support for local organisations to provide brokerage role – alongside a support role.

Putting substance behind the rhetoric around volunteering.

Learning from practice especially within the legal sector.

Not necessarily just pro bono – it could be about services offered at a discounted rate.

Education / learning / mentoring role so that people can better understand the VCS.

Local meetings and links with Chamber of Commerce.

**Q4: What support might your organisation need to become more resilient?**

Information, support, examples of accessing funding  
- bid writing experience

Learn from one another

Build flexibility into funding

Plan for long term funding

'Philanthropy' approach – support with no / less strings attached

Advanced notice of deadlines/intentions to commission

Mentor – within same sector learn / work with one another to achieve the result. Mentoring can occur face to face or by telephone/email/webcam.

Business Continuity – think about the future.

Training – provide sessions that community organisations can access to develop business skills / strategies / planning / development.

**Q5: What do you think should be the priorities for a bursary fund?**

If Pro bono support was effective would a bursary fund be necessary?

Priority is to reach groups who can't ordinarily access funds.

Applying for bursaries supports a competitive process when we are trying to support collaborative ways of working.

**Q6: How could any bursary fund be delivered simply and fairly?**

Ongoing links into the sector – build trust with groups.

Involve recipients of the bursary fund in future funding rounds / discussion panels.

Applications shouldn't be reliant on a form - groups to deliver presentations similar to 'Dragons Den' style.

Criteria will automatically exclude groups.

Can VCS have an input into the selection criteria for a bursary fund – include representatives from the VCS on panels.

Have local accountable support providers.

Is there an opportunity of an 'alternative offer' if you don't get a bursary such as a mentoring role.

**Q7: How could consolidation grants help ensure the sustainability and efficiency of infrastructure services?**

Collaboration of infrastructure.

Develop a 'one place' to encourage collaboration.

Focus on collaboration rather than consolidation – so that specialisms and expertise are not lost.

**Q8: Are there ways that expert intervention can support areas which are lacking social capital to improve local relationships and develop a stronger civil society?**

Geographic network role – this builds social capital.

All groups involve community members which organically builds social capital.

Community Development – the role of community development will bring in social capital. There needs to be careful consideration shown in branding ‘community development’. Be clear about what this means.

Does “expert intervention” refer to community organisers? The role of existing community organisations should be enhanced and supported by community organisers. The term “intervention” feels negative and could cause division and inequality in communities. Any intervention needs to be community led to have the most success.

**Q10: Do you have any further suggestions or comments on how the Office for Civil Society can help frontline groups become more efficient and effective?**

Consultation focused on frontline groups who provide services - it was felt that groups don't necessarily need to be delivering a service to be part of this consultation.

Clearer definitions of terms such as “civil society”, “community organisers” and “expert intervention” would have enabled participants to give more specific responses. The structure of some questions appeared to steer thinking in a particular direction.

The documentation gives no acknowledgement to what already exists in communities.

Influencing decision making – needs to be more Government mandates to ensure at least a minimum standard of community involvement in decision making processes.

Local strategic partnerships / Community Engagement Networks – the problems that existed then still exist now and therefore there is still a need for work to be done. We must build on what we already have.

Communal activity = mutual support.

A ‘Think Tank’ approach would be helpful to work ideas into solutions.

There needs to be an accepted definition/criteria for social enterprises - it is difficult to determine whether social enterprises are similar to community groups and charities or are they more like private sector businesses?

There is no question relating to Community Organisers and yet these appear to be pivotal to Big Society, as raised in Q8. Organisers need to incorporate community development and equality. Community organisers should be local.

There is no clear reference to equality and how that will be embedded into the Civil Society.