



Supporting a Stronger Civil Society

Community Council of Devon RESPONSE

December 2010

helping communities help themselves

Note about the Community Council of Devon (CCD)

The Community Council of Devon is a charitable company and the Rural Community Council for Devon.

We have excellent networks within rural communities, involving parish councils, village hall committees, together with community activists involved in many voluntary and community sector activities and locally based regeneration. We also administer small grants schemes and delegated funds, and in many cases form part of larger partnership arrangements. This range from European Funding programmes to strategic work at the local level.

We have about 850 local members – almost all organisations, so representing a broad spectrum of rural Devon. We have close relations with statutory agencies and with the voluntary and community sector. We also provide services to other independent bodies based with us including Devon Association of Local Councils, Devon Playing Fields Association and Devon Association of Community Buildings.

Over recent months, the Community Council of Devon has been leading thinking on the potential of the Big Society, its particular applicability to rural communities, and its potential to build social action and greater independence. Our ideas have won support from local county, district, town and parish councils as well as MPs and civil servants. A short paper can be found here

<http://www.devonrcc.org.uk/news.php?mode=2&nid=395>

Community Council of Devon, County Hall, Exeter, EX2 4QB E: info@devonrcc.org.uk T: 01392 383443
F: 01392 382062 www.devonrcc.org.uk Registered charity No: 1074047 Company limited by guarantee No: 3694095

The Community Council of Devon appreciates the opportunity to submit its views to the Office for Civil Society.

In general

The large majority of the population of Devon live in rural communities, with villages predominating. The county is large and sparsely populated; and in spite of considerable individual wealth, there is a high proportion with incomes below that of the national average. Service delivery across the spectrum is therefore a challenge.

Our Devon communities have a strong tradition of social action. This includes a number of community groups providing services from transport, to multi-purpose community halls, to sport, play, social, elder and child care, to enterprises running shops, post offices and pubs. The majority of our rural population has been involved in community-led planning – and this can be analysed via an innovative open access website, communities in action:

<http://syd.paribus.co.uk/cia/index.do>

The Community Council of Devon has been actively involved in ‘helping communities help themselves, and has been involved in supporting all the above locally base action in numerous communities since 1961. We do so from a value base which focuses on community development, empowerment and resilience.

Earlier this year, the Community Council of Devon has commissioned a baseline study of the Voluntary and Community Sector on behalf of Devon Consortium – a network of umbrella bodies, so we have up to date information about the sector and its needs which we and you can draw upon. The full report can be found here

<http://www.devonrcc.org.uk/news.php?mode=2&nid=408>

The key areas for support identified are as follows:

Short Term

- Accessing funding opportunities
- Attracting and retaining the right volunteers
- Management and leadership skills
- Demonstrating impact and effectiveness
- Increasing productivity (achieving more with less)

Longer Term

- Support for and managing change in organisations
- Increasing innovation and diversification
- Climate change and its impact on local organisations

Community Council of Devon responses to Consultation Questions

1 How can online services for frontline groups be improved?

There is little doubt that the trend is for a much greater use of internet services. These need to be free and carefully constructed to work easily in areas with poor or non-existent broadband. There needs to be a mix of nationally available information, locally available information – perhaps at county and unitary level, and well coordinated back up support.

The use of the internet in rural areas is vitally important, but cannot be seen as a solution for everyone. Apart from the broadband issues mentioned, not everyone is confident about using computers, not everyone has access to a computer, and people with visual or physical impairments will struggle to use a computer.

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

Government could promote a broader view of the voluntary and community sector to business. There is a tendency for some businesses to focus support on visually and emotionally appealing parts of the sector, and national bodies – especially those with good PR departments. Employee volunteering on a sustained rather than a one-off basis should be promoted by government.

A Big Society view might encourage business to support and engage in social action. At a small community level this does happen to a reasonably extent, but the low level of local business mitigates against significant impact.

3 How could brokerage of pro bono support be improved?

Sometimes we find that pro-bono specialist support from the professions is counter-productive because of limitations in their understanding or expectations of social and community action.

Where we have engaged with professional bodies to broker support to voluntary and community organisations we have found this to be highly successful, for example legal, architectural and planning support. We believe that the government could encourage professional bodies to build alliances with umbrella bodies serving relevant sections of the voluntary and community sector.

4 What support do organisations need to become more resilient?

Resilience needs to begin with good planning and a strong community base. The provision of public service contracts will not be relevant to the majority of small front-line organisations, and needs to be well supported where it is attempted.

Over the past decade, we have discovered the huge value of employing social enterprise advisors, working across the spectrum from commercially managed community businesses to more entrepreneurial and broad based voluntary and community organisations.

Since the late 1980s we have supported community-led planning. The critical importance of this at a community level is the process of getting local agencies and organisations to work together. This enables communities to be resilient through the action plans generated and the local collaboration engendered by the process. Where there has been central and local government support, it has been easier to develop large programmes, though there remains a community appetite for it despite scarce resources.

5 What should be the priorities for a bursary fund?

Bursary funds should encourage collaboration, merger, internet based provision, and self-help, eg for peer networking.

6 How could any bursary fund be delivered simply and fairly?

Such a fund, like the Modernisation Fund, needs to be delivered locally.

When the Community Council of Devon was asked to do the local coordination for the Modernisation Fund for Plymouth, Torbay and Devon, we were able to identify a list of professional advisors, and to match them to the needs of local applicants.

We were known directly by many of the applicant organisations. We were also able to help Capacity Builders to avoid errors of judgement and weed out mistaken or inappropriate applications. We also provided confidence in the face of bureaucratic processes or delays.

7 How could consolidation grants help ensure the sustainability and efficiency of infrastructure services?

The Modernisation Fund supported an above average number of collaborations in Plymouth, Torbay and Devon, despite the restrictions over theme and turnover. From our direct experience of being local agents for the Fund, we believe there is potential for more activity in this area and would like the turnover minimums to be reduced and the eligibility criteria to be broadened.

Locally, it was however noticeable that the appetite for merger was very muted compared with collaboration. Merger is very challenging for the bodies concerned, and not to be entered into lightly. Public bodies like local government often have a natural reluctance to use their funding and contracts to strongly encourage such rationalisation. If matters of critical mass and viability were addressed through consolidation grants, more effective voluntary sector infrastructure should result.

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

We believe the issue is not only one of developing social capital where it is weak, but also encouraging and empowering it where public services are limited or not available, including many rural and sparsely populated areas.

In both cases there is a need for sustained community development support. This should build upon the existing networks and agencies with track record in the relevant localities. Here also there is scope for peer networking and

support as a highly cost-effective back up to professional community development. It is very important – given the cuts in public expenditure which accompany an already deteriorating financial situation for the voluntary and community sector – that this is treated as a matter of urgency rather than to be achieved during the lifetime of this parliament.

Local authorities that are proactive in this field should be encouraged and incentivised by national government.

10 Further suggestions or comments?

Please refer to our introductory comments above.

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