

Notes of 3rd Reference Group

12 noon 4th March at AgeUK Hereford and Worcester

Welcome

Derek Markie and Philip Talbot (AgeUK) welcomed Doug Chaplin (Worcester Diocese), Kate Walton (Persore VC), Carole Cumino (Worcestershire Association of Carers), Richard Quallington (ACRE), Roger Britton (Community Foundation), Cat Illingworth (Young Solutions), Gary Roskell (BARN), and Michael Hunter chair of Voices, just back from extended leave.

Some had sent apologies and the wider Reference Group “in the loop” for these conversations is as attached. Chris Corke (Sports Partnership) had particularly hoped to attend for the first time. Jonathan Sutton, Mark Jackson and John Taylor also apologised.

Colleagues introduced themselves and Derek summarised where we left off last time. Colleagues had not been able to respond as hoped with papers but a number of discussions had taken place and both Roger and Philip had circulated thoughts ahead of the meeting.

Clarifying the role of the group

Derek invited Philip to start things off from his comments sent out this morning. (appended below)

Philip summarised his thinking saying that Richard’s apparent hesitancy at the end of the last meeting had left him concerned that we needed greater clarity of role and purpose. PT was happy with DM’s PEST approach and thought SWOT potentially valuable too but we need to define ourselves and have a publishable rationale and goals. The NCVO “Road Ahead” report circulated by RB is highly relevant. We need to identify OUR agenda albeit partly forced by the state and spell out our non- or anti- competitive stance. We also need to understand and explain the difference between the Voluntary and Community elements of the sector.

Richard and others agreed that there was a dilemma around “Voluntary” and “Community”

Cat had done some research and discovered 1932 charities in Worcestershire of which 81% had less than £100k turnover, 65% < £25k and 30% < £10k so were clearly not employing anyone. This number still excluded non-incorporated groups and unregistered charities. The larger organisations were almost all schools or housing association/trusts. This led her to question whether the bulk of the sector want “us” to do anything.

Gary suggested that many don’t care about the County level but local infrastructure bodies such as CVS have a clear role with which many grass-roots organisations are engaged.

Carole said we need to recognise that the latest trend in public sector thinking is inviting partners to “share the risk” of public funded programmes – very challenging to the truly voluntary sector.

The local (District) CVS / VC felt at times overlooked in Countywide networks.

It was difficult in such a complex landscape to keep everybody fully engaged. Derek said that WV had not been exclusive and there had always been a CVS rep on the “old” board. It had to be acknowledged that the county and others had wanted to simplify communications but we had consistently resisted and sought

to keep everyone informed through our bulletin and web-site. Delivery had never been in any part of WV function.

However today was an opportunity to declare values going forward and we would not compete and we would aim to be open. Every organisation had at some point seized an opportunity but having established our ground rule we could all hold each other to account in future. Need to recognise the very diverse set of linkages and be as open as possible to allow widest engagement.

Doug acknowledged the ambiguity about WV – it may not see itself as ‘infrastructure’ but county and others see it as that.

The breadth of the sector meant that many of the small charities and organisations were very ad hoc and limited in objectives but there is a significant part of the VCS which wants to be part of a bigger story. We are stronger together to push back against the public sector pressures.

Richard reminded the group that at the start we were invited to be a route to co-ordination rather than a single channel. Most (all) get some public money. WCC and others do not let go of the desire to “organise the sector”; they continue to recreate their own groups left right and centre to progress new initiatives despite our pleas.

Key Questions we should consider

- What is the difference between Community and Voluntary?
- What is the future survival rates for VCS organisations? We are not sure.
- What is Volunteering really about?

Networking is central to what we all do. Philip suggested that we need generic solutions implemented locally. We need to reconsider our models of representation, know what we hold in common and trust one another.

Cat observed that public bodies have been told to involve us but for them the VCS is “big, scary and they don’t understand us”. Perhaps we need to offer them training. Kate pointed out that they had tried that before - it came to nothing - they moved on.

Roger was more hopeful if we recognise that the relationships have changed since 10 years ago and will move on fast. There is an opportunity for the sector to influence – unknown unknowns – but we have to get stuck in – “authentic – authority – openness – volunteers - power”.

Philip observed that politically the agenda is that the state will withdraw - while for us in the sector poverty is still a big concern. He sees a model where the sector is about ‘bringing the competent to support the disadvantaged’ and find the funding from non-statutory sources.

Carole highlighted our role as ‘voices’ in strategic groups (eg H&WBB) giving a perspective on things that they have in their purview which are not ‘VCS’ at all.

Roger suggested we need to be able to answer the question “what can we do to help the public sector?” bearing in mind that the power balance has shifted in our favour. Also consider the private sector?

Michael suggested that ‘community interest’ should be the driver and we should not assume we can do it best – we must test our own position.

Derek suggested that we turn the tables and invite one of them engage with 10 of us instead of vice versa. Doug said that was what happened at the Racecourse conference but they weren’t really listening.

Agenda for a conference

Philip suggested a conference focusing on 4 areas

- 'Interfaces' – for example with the public sector and representation to it
- 'Volunteering' - what it is and how you harness it
- 'Organisational development' and the encouragement of fresh thinking to face the future
- 'Internal networking' and thinking to stimulate and engage with communities – democratisation

Cat observed that many organisations, faced with a 60% cut in public fund allocation, still refuse to put in joint bids – they'd rather carve it up into tiny pots!?

Kate wondered what would attract people to attend. Also what would be the 'outcome' of the conference. Headline speakers might be a draw them. An opportunity to develop a shared response and identifying commonalities and of course networking might be outcomes. More clarity and shape is required.

Next Steps

Derek suggested we need to start the ball rolling with 2 or 3 people to generate a proposal - an 'aunt sally'. (MH, RB, RQ, DM, PT all volunteered to contribute with a view to draft by 18th March)

There was a debate on whether we can move forward 'virtually'. Recent experience was that we'll lose people if we don't meet face to face.

Next meeting of Reference Group

Suggested either pm 5th April (1 -4) or 8th April.

Agenda: to agree the work plan and conference outline.

Derek agreed to finalise date via poll and Michael will then pick up lead.

The conference proposal would be circulated widely beyond the group.

Then 1st week of month for 4 months focusing on each area in turn. All invited and invitation extended beyond the Group for any to join in area that interests them – transmit via bulletin and cascade beyond

We should aim to include a statement of 'Who WV' is and 'what it is for'.

Philip agreed to set up the 4 topics and dates over May-August

Roger will facilitate the Conference co-ordination strand to ensure it happens by November.

Reference Group Membership

Suggested previously that the Group should welcome others by invitation but it must not be unduly restrictive

Derek had two suggestions:

- Karen Edwards of Citizens Advice SW who was ready to respond. (Gary asked if other CAB were to be invited or should Karen be encouraged to network with them.)
- Lorraine Preece of YSS - involved with Young Carers and Young people's contacts with the Criminal Justice system

Both would be invited

Doug highlighted that we should look for more from Redditch and Kidderminster.

Meeting closed at around 14:30

Note from Philip Talbot

Dear All

Thank you Roger (and previously Derek) for all the work you have put in to providing some forward movement on this issue. I am afraid I have not had a chance to contribute before today because the 'day job' and a couple of other major issues have had to take preference.

I recognise that we are all at different stages of thinking in this process and on reading the documents which have circulated from Roger and Derek, it struck me that I am still not clear what our real aim is and I wanted to highlight this before the meeting today.

For me a PEST(LE) analysis sets out the macro strategic environment in which we work. There is quite a lot of information available about this already and I think is, in reality, the catalyst for why we are meeting.

SWOT analysis are very much about 'us' in the 'present' and I am less sure we have a good handle on this element of our sector.

Both however are predicated on the vision of what we wish to be (our goals and objectives) and having read the papers again, I wonder what the purpose is of all of this?

- Are we developing a macro agenda for the voluntary sector in Worcestershire?
- Are we developing an agenda to support the state's evolution?
- Are we visioning a future for the voluntary sector in Worcestershire?
- Are we trying to establish what the VCS will actually do in the future?
- Is it a combination of the above?

I am certainly not trying to be negative about the process, or the idea, but rather seeking clarity of purpose because I think this is important if we are to get enthusiasm and commitment from our VCS colleagues outside the group.

I have already committed to supporting the process and leading on a relevant theme but I would like to be clearer on our purpose and goal.

I also think that the values of the VCS and the organisations need to be addressed in all of this. We have evolved into a competitive world which I think has much to do with the behaviours of organisations in the VCS as well as outside. If we are to follow a PEST approach, then I do think that we need to address this issue as a fabric of how we work. Both PEST and SWOT processes are designed for competitive focus. Is that what we want from this exercise? It also highlights a huge potential gulf between the 'voluntary' and 'community' sub sectors and I am not sure we have ever addressed that issue as a body, and yet we talk about communities in many variations and with little clarity of what that means.

Apologies for only sending this today. As it is short, I hope you will feel it is possible to read and it will add value to our conversations later.

I look forward to welcoming you all later.