

West Midlands

RURAL COMMUNITY

COUNCIL NETWORK



West Midlands Rural Community Council: Voluntary Sector Infrastructure

The West Midlands Rural Community Council Network draws together the four rural community councils (RCCs) which operate within the region. Each member RCC is an independent charitable organisation with a broad range of member organisations including parish councils, voluntary and community organisations and village halls, and has access through newsletters and mailings to over four thousand groups and individuals throughout the region. The RCCs have the common aims of promoting voluntary action and improving rural life. Across the West Midlands the RCCs have a combined turnover of over £3.75 million and employ over one hundred full time equivalent staff providing technical and professional support on issues and projects to people in local communities.

RCCs have a considerable understanding of rural issues borne out of a long involvement with rural communities. They provide a forum for voluntary and community organisations and a wide range of information and advisory services. They enjoy membership of many partnerships that encourage community development and capacity building in rural areas and that manage projects delivering benefits to rural communities. Part of the RCCs' effectiveness stems from the close relationships they have with networks including village hall committees, playing fields trusts and parish councils. Recently they have also developed relationships with regional structures, most notably through the West Midlands Regional Rural Affairs Forum, the West Midlands Rural Network, RAWM (Regional Action West Midlands - the voluntary and community sector network) and the West Midlands European Network.

Voluntary Sector Infrastructure

The RCC Network undertook a series of local events within each county to seek the views of local voluntary and community sector groups. This paper is a culmination of research on the general topic of voluntary sector infrastructure support within the rural areas of the West Midlands and the views expressed to RCCs within each county. It is not intended to be a definitive statement incorporating all the views of voluntary sector infrastructure support agencies across the West Midlands.

As one of a number of local infrastructure organisations, RCCs are often involved in a range of strategic and cross sectoral partnerships, many of which will involve some level of representative remit on behalf of communities and organisations in rural areas. Networks form an essential element of voluntary and community infrastructure support. RCCs are often instrumental, along with district/borough based CVSs, amongst others, in developing networks in rural communities to fill the gaps in areas with limited infrastructure support, or to provide focused support for a specific locality, interest group or activity.

“The Voluntary & Community Sector infrastructure provides support for organisational capacity, a voice for Voluntary & Community Organisations and access to representation and policy making.”

Rural Strategic Engagement Fund

The Rural Community Council Network was successful in its bid to the Regional Strategic Engagement Fund (RSEF) under the health and regeneration theme for funding of £35,000 for one year from 1 April 2002. Managed by RAWM and funded by Advantage West Midlands the purpose of the RSEF was to provide capacity building support to regionally and sub-regionally significant communities of interest to enable them to engage in regional policy and strategy development. The fund recognised the impact that the work of RCCs locally has on the health and regeneration of rural communities and provided support to enable the RCCs to work collectively to increase the participation of rural communities in shaping and informing the rural agenda across the region.

This paper is one of a series of four papers produced by the West Midlands RCC Network covering rural transport, rural housing, social enterprise and voluntary sector infrastructure support agencies. For an Executive Summary of all four or copies of individual papers contact Community First. A summary of all activity undertaken under the RSEF programme is also available.

COUNCIL NETWORK

What is Infrastructure?

Voluntary sector infrastructure, according to NCVO “includes all those [organisations] playing a supporting, co-ordinating or development role within the sector. Infrastructure bodies may also be known as umbrella bodies or ‘second tier’ voluntary organisations – that is they exist to support the ‘first tier’ organisations whose role it is to deliver services or give advice direct to individuals or communities or who campaign and advocate on specific issues. Infrastructure bodies exist at local, county, regional and national levels. They may be generic – they provide support to the full range of voluntary organisations operating within a particular geographic area – or they may be sub-sectoral – they provide support to a particular part of the voluntary sector, for example childcare organisations or organisations dealing with homelessness”

Within the shire counties of the West Midlands, there are a number of voluntary sector infrastructure organisations. These range from Rural Community Councils (RCCs), Councils for Voluntary Service (CVS), Volunteer Bureaux (VBx), who are all generic infrastructure bodies, to Associations of Parish Councils, Racial Equalities Councils (RECs), Councils for Voluntary Youth Services and other specialist support agencies. These bodies are also sometimes known as local development agencies or LDAs.



The Rural Voluntary Sector Infrastructure Bodies in the West Midlands

Herefordshire has moved from a structure with 5 CVSs (Bromyard and District, Ledbury and District, South Herefordshire based at Ross on Wye, North Herefordshire based at Leominster, and Hereford) to two: One large CVS covering most of the County, named Herefordshire Voluntary Action, which is made up of an amalgamation of 4 CVSs, plus Community Voluntary Action Ledbury and District which will remain independent.

Originally the 5 CVSs plus Community First (the RCC) made up a grouping known as HDAN (Herefordshire Development Agencies Network). The new set-up means HDAN will cease to exist, and a liaison group will take its place. Projects that were "owned" by HDAN, and its work programme, will now be owned and managed by the individual organisations. Several very constructive meetings have taken place to build a strong and clear relationship between these organisations and make decisions on areas of mutual interest and concern. The new structure formally came into place on 1 April 03.

In addition to Community First, **Worcestershire** had full coverage by local LDAs but in the last couple of years gaps have appeared. There are functioning LDAs in Worcester City, Pershore, Evesham, Droitwich, Malvern Hills, and Wyre Forest. In Bromsgrove and in Redditch there are no longer CVSs or VBx for various reasons generally connected to funding. A community network known as BARN (Bromsgrove and Redditch Network) is fulfilling some of the functions and has obtained funding for some consultancy work to plan the way forward.

For a number of years the LDAs in Worcestershire and Community First have been meeting together informally to share experiences and to work on common issues. The Worcestershire LDA forum has started work on the 'Compact' and is currently considering mechanisms for greater joint working.

The LDAs in Herefordshire and Worcestershire have separately made bids to the Partnership Development Fund of NACVS / ACRE / NAVB, which have both been successful. The plan is that these pieces of work, to be carried out by consultants, will help the LDAs and Community First to develop and plan ways of working more effectively together, develop protocols for joint working, strengthen consultation with service users and demonstrate a stronger commitment to effective partnership working.

Within **Shropshire**, there are 5 LDAs in addition to the RCC. North Shropshire

Voluntary Action, Voluntary Action Shrewsbury and South Shropshire Voluntary Action are all members of NACVS and also of Volunteer Development England (VDE) as they incorporate a significant Volunteer Bureau component. Oswestry Community Action is an associate member of NACVS. Bridgnorth Voluntary Action has suffered from core funding problems and is likely to close.

Work between the Shropshire LDAs has been sporadic, on an individual basis, and project focused in the past; however the recent successful bid to the Partnership Development Fund has allowed the LDAs to meet and begin to develop protocols for working together in the future.

Warwickshire has five CVSs, two of which incorporate volunteer bureaux (Stratford CVS and CVS Warwick District). There are three additional volunteer bureaux, within Rugby, North Warwickshire and Nuneaton and Bedworth, as well as the RCC. The CVSs have been successful in securing project funding within the County and are well developed. They have a long history of working together and this has resulted in collaborative projects between the CVSs. For example, the CVSs have recently bid jointly to the local LSC for training and quality development officers. Nuneaton and Bedworth CVS is within the AWM Regeneration Zone (Coventry & Nuneaton), and it is effectively an urban district.

Over the past two years the working relationships between the Warwickshire CVSs and the RCC have improved and the Chief Officers meet on a regular basis. A recent review of the organisations has confirmed that both financially and structurally the current structure is the "best fit" for Warwickshire.

Recent attempts to set up an LDA forum for Coventry and Warwickshire have been frustrated by the number of LDAs with only a part time chief officer. A recent successful bid to the Partnership Development Fund has secured funding to enable the chief officers to meet and develop strategies to work together more effectively.

Staffordshire

Within Staffordshire there are 9 LDAs based upon the local authority districts (including the City of Stoke-on-Trent) in addition to the RCC. Volunteer bureaux also exists within the majority of the districts, some being independent of the LDA, others being part of the LDA.

There is a long history of the LDAs working together, usually based upon former health

authority boundaries, i.e. north and south county. However, more recently work has been undertaken on a countywide basis, particularly in the field of training with resources being drawn down from the LSC.

Other infrastructure bodies and networks

Within each county, RCC's work closely with other infrastructure bodies and specialist networks of voluntary organisations, where they exist and are appropriate to the work undertaken by the RCC. All RCCs work with their local association of Parish and Town Councils (ALCs) on a regular basis, in addition to other organisations.

These other voluntary sector infrastructure networks include:

- Councils for Voluntary Youth Services and Youth Associations
- Race Equality Councils and other BME networks
- Associations of Voluntary Sector Organisations involved in Community Care
- Specialist Health, Care and Disability Networks
- Countywide Age Concern groups
- Community Transport Partnerships
- Environmental Networks

In addition the local CVSs and LDAs also work in partnership with these agencies to achieve mutual objectives.

There are a number of new networks focusing on learning across the region. For example, voluntary sector organisations are closely involved in the Local Learning Networks based on geographical communities within Worcestershire, and the Local Learning Development Groups also geographically based in Herefordshire. Although these are not distinctly voluntary sector networks there is a Worcestershire Voluntary Sector Learning Network that is a strategic group of the Learning Partnership, and a Herefordshire one, which also doubles as the Voluntary Sector Assembly Constituency Group of voluntary organisations, interested in learning.

Within Warwickshire there is a multi-agency 'Partners in Learning' group which has been working closely with the Learning and Skills Council on learning with the voluntary sector in Coventry and Warwickshire. Recent research, funded by the local LSC has resulted in the engagement of a consultant to explore setting up a learning consortium for the whole sector in Coventry and Warwickshire.

Regional *Voluntary Sector Infrastructure Support*

Within the West Midlands, the overarching infrastructure support agency is Regional Action West Midlands (RAWM). RAWM was set up in June 2000 to support the capacity of the voluntary and community sector to contribute to and influence regional strategy and policy. RAWM works with voluntary sector organisations and infrastructure bodies across the West Midlands in both urban and rural areas. It has supported the development of specialist networks looking at issues such as housing and has endorsed the emergence of the West Midlands RCC Network, of which each RCC within the West Midlands is a member.



EMBRACE, a similar regional organisation to RAWM works with black and minority ethnic (BME) communities on strategy, policy and infrastructure engagement and development.

National *Voluntary Sector Infrastructure Support*

Some RCCs are members of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO); which works with and for the voluntary sector in England by providing information, advice and support and by representing the views of the sector to government and policy-makers.



Some are also members of the National Association of Councils for Voluntary Services (NACVS), which helps to promote voluntary and community action by supporting member CVSs and by acting as a national voice for the local voluntary and community sector.

Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE) is a national charity whose purpose is to support sustainable rural community development. It provides a national platform for its member RCCs, other bodies and individuals who work at local, county, regional and national level to alleviate rural disadvantage in England. ACRE's aim is to facilitate the development of thriving, diverse and sustainable communities throughout rural England

Community Matters is the nationwide federation for community associations and similar organisations. Community Matters has played a key role in promoting and supporting action by ordinary people in response to social, educational and recreational needs in their neighbourhoods and communities. Its mission is to support and develop the capacity of community organisations and to represent their interests at a national level.

Voluntary Infrastructure Support – *the national issues*

In September 2002, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the Rt. Hon Paul Boateng MP, published a report into 'The Role of the Voluntary and Community Sector in Service Delivery – A cross cutting review'. The review report identifies 42 recommendations designed to overcome barriers facing voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) in delivering high quality services and to support long term partnerships between Government and the voluntary and community sector (VCS).

The review focuses on five key themes: service delivery; social and community enterprise; capacity; the funding relationship; and development of the Compact.

The role of voluntary sector infrastructure bodies is recognised within the section dealing with capacity. The report states that the "VCS has the potential to bring substantial benefits to service delivery. Government and the VCS have, therefore, a mutual interest in ensuring that the VCS has the capacity to deliver".

The report also highlights the importance of capacity building for the VCS. "Capacity building is about ensuring that VCOs have the skills, knowledge, structures and resources to realise their full potential. It is a second tier activity that supports front line delivery and typically involves removing barriers to involvement and investing to maximise the contribution that VCOs can make. It is as much about releasing existing capacity as about developing new capacity."

The report highlights four different kinds of capacity

- Organisational capacity
- Technical capacity to deliver specific services
- Infrastructure capacity and
- Community capacity

"The VCS infrastructure provides support for organisational capacity,

a voice for VCOs and access to representation and policy making."

One of the issues highlighted by the report is that the current infrastructure has developed on a piecemeal basis. Thus whilst some parts of the sector have good infrastructure support the overall coverage is variable in quality and fragile. There are significant gaps in networks and some duplication. The report suggests that there is further scope for collaborative working between organisations.

The report calls for a consistent practice within Whitehall in its approach to voluntary sector infrastructure bodies. It suggests that "the value of this investment [by the government] would be enhanced if it were brought together into one cross government strategy for VCS capacity building and infrastructure support, with common purposes, resulting in more coherent and effective delivery." The report also recognises the inconsistency between local authorities and their support for the VCS.

Within this section of the report, there are a number of other key recommendations, which will impact upon the sector. These include:

- * The development of an assessment tool used to undertake a 'capacity check' of the strength and depth of the sector for



individual organisations; specific service sectors; across geographical areas (local, county, regional and national and for infrastructure groups)

- * A new protocol for service and programme development, identifying best practice for collaboration and joint planning of services

- * Joint work to ensure sector specific skills are better understood and the skills gap tackled

- * A joint programme to develop the capacity of the public sector and voluntary and community sector to work together effectively.

The Government has committed itself to implementing the review in full by April 2006 and the Active Communities Unit of the Home Office is establishing Implementation Teams across the five areas of the review, drawn from Government and the voluntary and community sector – locally, regionally and nationally.

Whilst this review is positive for the voluntary and community sector on the whole, there are concerns generally for infrastructure organisations, which are important to highlight. These are detailed in the next section.

Difficulties and challenges for local voluntary sector infrastructure organisations

A key issue, which faces voluntary sector infrastructure organisations, is that of resourcing the infrastructure. Most non-statutory funders are interested in funding the delivery of services, rather than funding the infrastructure to support organisations that deliver services. The notable exception to this is the Lloyds TSB Foundation, which is one of the few non-statutory funders willing to fund voluntary sector infrastructure support.

Statutory funders are generally more willing to resource voluntary sector infrastructure. However, there is generally a wide gulf between what networks and infrastructure bodies see as needed in terms of good practice levels of consultation, information dissemination and accountability back to the sector, and that which can be resourced. Too often the best that can be achieved, with the resources available, is just enough to be unsatisfactory to both parties.

Many statutory partners have difficulty in understanding and valuing the size and diversity of the sector. Statutory organisations would prefer the voluntary and community sector to have a single voice. The sector, however, sees its main strength lying in its independence and diversity, in its commitment to campaigning for a multitude of different causes and in its ability to articulate with many different voices. This makes for a richness but an "untidiness" which statutory partners tend to find difficult to handle. It also means that full participation and involvement of the sector is a time-consuming, challenging and resource hungry process.

Within rural areas this problem tends to be compounded. Research undertaken by NCVO on 'Organisational Relationships and Networks in the Voluntary Sector: The Rural Analysis' suggests that networks and infrastructure support is key to rural organisations, however, from their research NCVO found that of the organisations surveyed:

- 80% of respondents had no contact with their CVS
- 67% of respondents had no contact with their RCC and
- 82 % of respondents had no contact with their local volunteer bureau.



Similar research in urban areas conducted by NCVO, found that the level of contact amongst most organisations was higher overall than in the rural survey.

Further findings from the research in rural areas suggested that:

- "voluntary organisations based in rural areas are less likely to influence the development of public policy than some of their counterparts in towns and cities
- these organisations tend to display low levels of awareness of the 'big' issues for the voluntary sector at large
- many voluntary organisations working in rural areas felt isolated and under-represented and found it difficult to make their voices heard.

Lack of influence, lack of negotiating power and lack of recognition are repeatedly raised by rural organisations as areas of frustration. It seems likely that the lack of networks and paucity of organisational relationships amongst voluntary organisations working in rural areas are significant factors in this lack of voice."

Recent seminars on the issue of the engagement of rural voluntary sector organisations in the West Midlands

have indicated that some of the issues arise because rural voluntary organisations are smaller comparatively, making it more difficult for them to engage with infrastructure organisations. Infrastructure organisations then become relatively more important in translating complex regional, national and European funding opportunities for organisations, but find it difficult to obtain funding for this vital work.

Within rural areas, infrastructure support agencies will continue to play a vital role for small voluntary and community sector organisations without the staff time or resources to engage with policy makers. Increasingly, infrastructure organisations will need to engage with statutory authorities to explain the sector, and to act as a facilitator between these agencies and the voluntary and community sector.

Infrastructure support agencies play an essential part in creating networks linking small local organisations. These networks enable the sharing of ideas, issues and resources and work to break down the barriers which isolate organisations from each other and from other sectors. Some of the government agendas will only make sense and become relevant to small organisations once these organisations understand that they are part of a sector.

Some urban areas within this rural setting often experience the sorts of disadvantage associated with inner city areas. However, they receive no assistance through inner city type renewal programmes nor from programmes targeted at rural deprivation. This can mean that the local authority becomes the only realistic source of either core or project funding, with no alternative sources available.

The Way Forward

The sector is learning to present itself to funders and partners in a more assertive way as the means to achieve partners' and funders' objectives. In addition, voluntary organisations are embracing quality requirements such as PQASSO, Investors in People and other quality standards where they can appreciate the appropriateness. Voluntary sector infrastructure organisations are seeking to be models of good practice, however, this is made more difficult by the lack of funding available to undertake such quality initiatives.

There is increasingly an understanding that capacity building includes helping the statutory sector to engage with the voluntary and community sector and not just vice versa. Similarly, accountability is not just something imposed on the voluntary sector, which is accountable for public money, service delivery etc. Statutory partners, too, need to think of

their own accountability to the sector in terms of feeding back the results of consultation, and in reporting how policy has been influenced by sector representation. As local partners develop and implement COMPACTs, the understanding between different sectors should increase. Within Warwickshire a countywide COMPACT has been agreed

and funding has been made available by the County Council to appoint a Compact Officer to drive forward work associated with the COMPACT.

At a regional level there is also a growing recognition that capacity building is needed to ensure that the voluntary and community sector effectively influences and engages with the developing regional agenda. In a phase 2 of the Regional Strategic Engagement Fund, Advantage West Midlands (the regional development agency) has made an 'in principle' commitment to continue its support to a number of embryonic regional voluntary sector networks established in a first phase of funding.

Examples of good practice

The Voluntary Sector Assembly for Herefordshire

The Assembly has been set up through a project sponsored by the LDAs and Community First, and funded from the Active Communities Unit of the Home Office. The Assembly aims to enable full engagement by the sector in the workings of Herefordshire Partnership, its Board, Management Group, and the Ambition Groups which drive forward sections of the Herefordshire Plan. Herefordshire Voluntary Action is the accountable body and employs the project's staff. The full Assembly meets twice a year, and representatives are elected, trained, supported and funded to participate in the various groups of the Partnership. Voluntary organisations and community groups flag up their areas of interest and are placed in the relevant constituency groups (e.g. transport, health and social care, etc.). Each constituency group then elects its representatives, who then consult and inform the constituency members of the work as it progresses.

FUSE Network

This network engages the 2 RCCs and the 9 LDAs covering parts of the three counties (Herefordshire, Worcestershire & Shropshire) specifically matched to the Rural Regeneration Zone area. The Network's prime purpose is to enable better engagement of the voluntary and community sector in the Rural Regeneration Zone.

Skill Base

This is a joint venture between Warwickshire RCC and the Stafford and District Voluntary Services, which provides voluntary sector and community training throughout the Stafford district. A joint bid was developed for submission to the Community Fund, which was successful and the first year of the three-year programme has been completed.

Coventry & Warwickshire LDA Forum

The forum consists of the RCC, CVSS, Volunteer Bureaux and Councils for Voluntary Youth Services in Coventry and Warwickshire. Following research funded by Coventry and Warwickshire Learning and Skills Council, the forum is leading the work to set up a Learning Consortium that will operate at a strategic level on learning and training for the Voluntary and Community Sector. The Forum is currently looking to create a sub regional VCS strategy on funding, to influence local funders specifically, using the Warwickshire Compact as a framework.

RAWM's Learning Project

This has operated by holding regional events and by visiting sub-regional and local events. Although organisations are interested they find it hard to justify the time it takes to attend regional events, and these may sometimes be seen as serving the agenda of others rather than being of direct benefit to delegates. The Regional Learning Project has developed a web

based Learning Community which enables online discussion and updating which may be an excellent initiative and worth watching as a pilot for a more practical way to involve the sector.

Worcestershire Care Organisations

In 2002, WAVOCC (Worcestershire Association of Voluntary Organisations in Community Care) together with Worcestershire County Council's social services department worked together to produce the Worcestershire Protocol which sets out a framework for the voluntary sector and Social Services to work together. The aim of the protocol is to build good and productive relationships between the two parties based on a shared vision and key principles. Good practice codes have subsequently been developed on Funding and Consultation and Involvement. All are being monitored and reviewed to see how they make a difference.

Engaging Worcestershire

This new initiative is focused on helping voluntary organisations in general and infrastructure bodies in particular to engage more effectively with the growing number of Local Strategic Partnerships developing in Worcestershire. An initial conference has formulated the agenda for voluntary sector LSP engagement within the county which a steering group is now driving forward in the form of an action plan of practical initiatives.

Conclusions

The advent of Community Strategies and Local Strategic Partnerships and the expectation of energetic participation by voluntary and community organisations will only reinforce the need for capable and facilitative intermediary bodies such as local CVS's and county based Rural Community Councils. However, concern has been expressed that local infrastructure arrangements have to have the flexibility to meet local needs, and still have independence from government. Concerns are more significant, when the question of who funds voluntary sector infrastructure organisations is considered. Will the Treasury Cross Cutting Review lead to a change in the current funding regime? Will there be a more structured, but less independent arrangement? Will funding come from Local Authorities, and be tied to their outcomes, or will a variety of agencies fund infrastructure organisations to differing degrees? Given the importance of infrastructure support to local groups, these questions are key to the future of the sector.



local, sub-regional and regional developments. The availability of the NACVS/NAV/Bx/ACRE Partnership Development Fund has enabled much of this joint work to begin, and this is to be welcomed. The RCCs experience from this fund shows that with adequate resources, infrastructure organisations can work together effectively to reflect the voice of rural communities to key relevant policy makers. The continuation of this funding to further develop partnerships between LDAs would be welcome.

The Government's Cross Cutting Review of the Voluntary and Community Sector is also to be welcomed as this will help to raise awareness and understanding of the sectors key role in civil society. The review tends to emphasise the sector's effectiveness in service delivery - just one of many roles the sector plays in today's society. There is a real danger that other important functions will be overlooked including the part played by voluntary sector infrastructure organisations, whose role is to build capacity rather than to deliver services directly. In addition the infrastructure support needs of Black & Ethnic Minority organisations and communities also needs further consideration in relation to a rural context.

There are a number of key partnerships developing across the West Midlands Region amongst infrastructure organisations, to ensure that adequate support can be given to local organisations to enable them to participate in and influence key

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