



**Improving voluntary sector
knowledge, skills and capability
to influence policy
(2007 - 2012)**

Evaluation report

Supporting Change and Developing Impact Evaluation Project

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Background

The purpose of the Supporting Change and developing impact Evaluation Project is to evaluate *Improving voluntary sector knowledge, skills and capability to influence policy*, a 5 year project funded by Basis and delivered by KCSC since 2007. The objectives of the evaluation are to explore:

1. The learning that has taken place from the delivery of the project to date
2. Whether the learning that has taken place has developed appropriate skills and knowledge required to take them into the future given the new policy environment
3. What further skills and support do VCOs need as seniors/emerging leaders to be able to navigate their way through the complex and challenging policy environment
4. What further support is required that will strengthen local leadership

The outcomes are for KCSC to have a measurement of the impact of Basis since 2007 and to have a clear idea regarding the direction and delivery of the leadership school.

Improving voluntary sector knowledge, skills and capability to influence policy

The proposal for the above project arose out of the recognition that information about policy and the work of voluntary organisations in the borough was not comprehensive, easy to access or kept updated. The sector needs good quality policy information to keep abreast of new developments in order to plan their services and manage their organisation to meet the demands of an ever changing environment. Furthermore, developing the sector's skills and knowledge in this area would enable it to contribute effectively to consultations that impact on their organisations or the communities that they work with.

The Basis project outcomes were:

1. The VCS in Kensington and Chelsea have improved access to relevant information through web policy information and newsletter.
2. Improved skills and knowledge for 150 groups in Kensington and Chelsea
3. Improved capacity within the VCS to respond to policy and practice. Feedback mechanisms established to 12 meetings per year.
4. Improved capacity within KCSC to support frontline organisations by providing 6 policy updates a year and the ability to update web and newsletters more effectively.

To meet these outcomes, KCSC used the Basis funding to focus on the following services: information (using the website, e-bulletins and newsletter),

policy briefing meetings, consultation responses, consortia development, influencing the local authority, co-ordinating theme-based voluntary sector forums (VOFs), support for groups to re-define services and support for groups to respond to changes in policy and practice. The Basis project delivered a range of activities to address the outcomes:

1. The website was developed with improved access to information through links in the e-bulletins and it now has an integrated database and events booking system all of which support monitoring of provision.
2. Policy events were held on national and local policy developments impacting on the sector and how RBKC were responding to these developments. Examples of some of the topics covered include tri-borough developments, the Equality Act, Impact of the Cuts and Personalisation.
3. The 5 Voluntary Organisations Forums have been supported to understand local to national policy agendas and impact of the sector.
4. Training and support has been provided to voluntary sector representatives who sit on strategic groups and feedback mechanisms established so that there is a clear structure for the sector to influence the Council.
5. A Somali Network comprising 5 groups has established to identify opportunities for joint work.
6. Support to the Kensington and Chelsea Advice Forum to engage particularly with RBKC officers on areas of welfare changes.
7. Support to set up a children and families consortium comprising 9 organisations to bid for a national contract.
8. Enabling the sector to respond to a number of consultations. Setting up Poverty Watch in response to research carried out on public sector cuts and the voluntary and community sector.

Despite sustaining a reduction to its funding, KCSC have managed to sustain its current staffing level and is financially stable and in 2012 was successful in securing funding from the Transforming Infrastructure Fund.

In their monitoring reports to the Basis, KCSC demonstrated progress against the outcomes and milestones identified all of which were successfully achieved. KCSC carried out a number of surveys of the sector over the life of the project that helped it to measure its effectiveness in meeting the outcomes identified in the Basis bid. These were able to demonstrate that the outcomes were achieved with the majority of respondents saying that the email notices and bulletins, website, and newsletter were very informative and useful and over 60 organisations that responded to the Impact Survey said that they had improved knowledge and skills. This finding was substantiated by a further 43 groups who filled in evaluation forms for policy events they had attended. Results of an evaluation of the Voluntary Organisations Forums showed that all that responded had an increased knowledge of strategic developments locally and nationally.

This project has built on the results of the previous surveys through focus groups and questionnaires and other meetings. These provided participants with an opportunity to comment on the services provided by the Basis project and to prioritise them in relation to other support services. Participants were also asked whether or not they would be willing or able to pay for specific services.

Methodology

The methodology initially identified was to run focus groups to include Chief Executives, new and emerging leaders and small community groups. It was agreed to run three of the focus groups for the voluntary sector in partnership with the Change Manager at KCSC part of the Transforming Infrastructure Programme whose role is to explore the support needs of local VCOs.

The brief also included a meeting with the Chief Executive of CaVSA (the CVS in Hammersmith and Fulham) to explore opportunities for collaboration and the Children and Families Acting Director of Strategy, Commissioning and Performance, RBKC.

The responses in this report are based on questionnaires and notes from discussions at the different meetings. The format and questionnaires used for the meetings varied slightly depending on the audience and numbers. Participants responded to questions on priorities and new services without any prompting but, where possible, percentages have been used to summarise responses.

Details of the meetings and participants can be found in Appendix A.

Summary of information from meetings relating to the Basis project

The main areas of activity have been grouped together.

Activity	Feedback	Challenges	Suggestions	Willingness to pay
Information (newsletter, e-bulletins, and website)	Highly valued. Up-to-date, clear & accessible. Groups can keep abreast of policy & local sector developments & use information to support development of their organisation. All participants in New Leaders Support Group identified information as a priority service area	The website could be more interactive. One participant found it difficult to navigate	Member log-in for peer support; KSCS blog; calendar of events. Smaller groups want more information as they are less able to attend meetings. Section on website with research, borough data and statistics to support impact work and funding applications	70% participants would not pay for an information service and 20% might, 10% were unsure
Policy briefings and networks. Representation and voice	75% participants identified policy, representation and the networks as good or excellent. Support for representatives rated as excellent with one participant stating it was variable but mostly very good.	Capacity to attend meetings clearly an issue. Day long events very difficult. 25% participants commented that they would prefer not to attend evening or weekend meetings especially if they lived out of the borough, had families or attended church	Shorter meetings perhaps over lunch or held towards the end of the day. Participants working with African communities interested in replicating Somali Network model. Payment to small groups to attend meetings (used to be offered this support)	50% of participants would not pay for a policy network or briefing and 25% might pay, 25% were unsure
Consortium development	Positive feedback especially on the PQQ training which one participant described as 'outstanding'. Another commented that setting up the Consortium could not have happened without KCSC. 30% participants identified consortium support as good/excellent	Supporting Consortia development is time consuming. Can a Consortium have a life if bids not successful? Requires support to set up and run	Training or support on developing partnerships and working collaboratively. Develop models of good practice and checklist	Participants were not asked if they would pay for this service

The findings summarised above confirm those from the previous surveys carried out by KSCS showing strong support for the activities delivered by the Basis project with respondents claiming that they helped them to understand new policy developments and the relevance to their own organisations. The activities allowed participants to develop their organisation's services to take account of policy developments at a national and local level and learn from and network with their colleagues. Whilst influencing the Council has been challenging at times, participants welcomed the opportunities they had to have their views represented to the Council.

The Council itself has found KCSC's work in raising awareness of their consultations and supporting VCS responses very helpful. It has also been impressed with the quality of the discussions at some of the VOFs and how they have supported the sector to have a stronger voice. The quality, timeliness and relevance to the sector is key to the usefulness of the information provided. A Chief Executive expressed concern that if the Social Council did not provide this service then groups would be dependent on information directly from public bodies that would not necessarily interpret and translate policy for the voluntary sector.

Three of the five focus groups were asked if they preferred services delivered on a borough level; bi- or tri-borough level or national/regional level and 55% said local, 35% bi- or tri-borough and 10% ticked both borough-wide and bi/tri-borough wide with no support at all for services delivered nationally or regionally. Those who preferred local delivery cited local knowledge and awareness of the local environment as the main reasons. One Chief Executive who currently works across more than one borough said that it was very time consuming having to liaise with and receive information from organisations in 3 boroughs and would welcome some jointly delivered services around policy and information.

80% of all of the participants said that they believed that their organisations had the necessary skills to be sustainable in the future which demonstrates the effectiveness of KCSC support. Many of those commented that this was the case only for the next year or so or dependent on funding and staffing. Participants also said that they will need ongoing support to maintain this as the environment or their organisation changes. 10% said they didn't have the right skills and another 10% said they weren't sure.

Further skills and support for leadership

To build on the work of the Basis project to support the sector and improve capacity and sustainability, KCSC has been exploring the need and viability of 'Community Leadership School'. Information from the focus group meetings and questionnaires shows that there is strong support for good quality leadership development including training, both accredited and non-accredited, one-to-one support (mentoring and coaching) and peer support. Current services around leadership development provided by KCSC that were rated as very good or excellent are: training (completing a PQQ, leadership and being a representative were specifically mentioned); policy briefings/networks, consortia support and development; and trustee recruitment and support.

Participants of the focus group comprising leaders of the future were asked to consider the type of leadership activities they would find beneficial based on the challenges they were currently facing. The group identified the main challenges as: the uncertainty caused by the changing environment; changing job roles as different functions are amalgamated into one post; too much work; pressure to meet targets means that staff support can suffer; managing difficult staff; the constant pressure to raise funds and the lack of capacity and sometimes skills to do this. Whilst they accessed support from colleagues, trustees, line managers and information from other organisations, this was not always timely or appropriate. The group were asked to discuss the functions of a community leadership school and to develop some ideas of what support could be provided in the future.

These are described below:

- A Support Group for leaders of the future was regarded positively but there were concerns about how to address issues of confidentiality. It was not enough to agree that anything discussed be kept confidential as people felt that there were certain issues that could compromise their organisation's reputation that they would not want to raise with colleagues from the local sector. It was suggested that one way forward could be to have generic topics such as 'dealing with an ineffectual line manager', 'managing conflict within a staff team', 'the role of a chair' and so on.
- Workshops exploring different models on 'what makes a good leader'
- Cross-borough mentoring to address issues of confidentiality
- New leaders could be 'buddied' for additional support
- To carry out a skills audit of people in the sector to identify the right people for peer support or mentoring - could explore a LETs or Timebank type scheme where people could exchange skills or support
- KCSC induction to the borough - borough make-up, how the borough works, who's who etc
- Shadowing that is either topic or role specific
- Informal drop ins with dates set over the year - some with themes/speakers
- Identify speakers from outside of the borough or sector that could offer different perspectives.

Everyone who took part in the various focus groups for this project were asked to identify and prioritise which current or new services they would like provided to support leadership in the borough. These have been summarised below:

- Mentoring/supervision for senior staff including Chief Executives
- Individual development and support
- Support for the next generation of leaders
- Training – including accredited training and professional leadership training

- Mentoring/coaching
- How to manage
 - Workshops on different styles of leadership and inspirational leaders
 - Peer support
 - Shadowing

The Manager's Support Group (now called the Chief Executive Officer's Group) was mentioned by 3 of the participants who broadly welcomed it but thought that it required strong support from KCSC as it was a bit 'up and down' in terms of attendance and quality. One participant said that it was particularly helpful when she first became a Chief Executive.

There was a recognition from participants that professional and other accredited training came at a cost and 80% of participants were prepared to pay for this service whilst the small community groups said they could not afford to pay for this unless they received funding for it. When this was broken down further into mentoring/coaching, shadowing, peer support, residential leadership events and action learning sets, there was a fairly even split between those who would pay, wouldn't pay or might pay. One person commented that this depended on the quality and cost which may be an accurate reflection of the other responses. 65% of all participants rated KCSC training as good or excellent and participants who had benefited from its mentoring service rated it 'good' so it appears to have a sound reputation with the sector for the delivery of leadership support.

Some participants were more specific about the areas that leadership support could address:

- Best practice in developing partnerships and collaborative working
- Fundraising/bid writing/developing a fundraising strategy
- Business planning
- Project management
- Contracts and the law
- Getting ready for contracts
- HR
- How to evaluate/measure impact (for projects as well as organisations) and demonstrate quality
- Understanding Marketing
- First Aid/Health and Safety
- Budgeting/financial management for project managers
- Providing support on funding bids especially for small groups whose staff/volunteers do not have English as a first language
- Bespoke support for organisations

Based on discussions in the groups, the following personal leadership areas identified for support were:

- Time management
- Dealing with workplace stress
- Dealing with conflicting priorities
- Workforce wellbeing/staff support

Conclusion

There is clearly goodwill towards KCSC from the sector and recognition of the leadership role that it provides. The activities and services it delivers were valued and seen as worthwhile and there were no comments to say that any of the services were not needed or of little value. The responses to this particular piece of work and previous surveys and evaluations carried out demonstrate that KCSC have met the outcomes of the Basis project through its various strands of delivery. Its strength in the delivery of policy support is that it is trusted by the sector and that it can translate and interpret policy specifically for the sector in Kensington and Chelsea.

There is a difficult balance to strike in terms of the number of meetings organised for so that they can be kept informed about as well as influence current policy developments with the capacity of groups to spare the time to attend. Different formats and timings of meetings and events could be explored. Networking with colleagues from the voluntary sector was often cited as a benefit of the policy briefings and networks and a number of participants suggested more networking with people from other sectors or geographical areas.

The reluctance to pay for most of the policy, voice and information services provided may be because they are seen as core KCSC services so KCSC would need to demonstrate what the direct benefit to an organisation would be over and above what is currently offered before considering charging. It is more difficult to persuade people to pay for a service that they have been receiving at no cost for many years.

From the focus group discussions it can be realised that local delivery is pertinent for support that needs to take account of local circumstances and bi- or tri-borough for support that is more generic. The development of tri-borough working by the local authorities and CaVSA's willingness to explore opportunities for joint working on community leadership support could lead to a more efficient use of resources for particular activities.

Next Steps

KCSC will build on the work of the Basis project by continuing to provide information and support around policy to the VCS in Kensington and Chelsea and by exploring opportunities for the development of income generating products and services. To prepare for the establishment of a 'Community Leadership School' a 3 year Strategic Plan has already been produced which has taken into account the findings of this evaluation. A 3 month pilot will run from September to December 2012 which will offer services already identified for the school including policy support and networks. The pilot will be evaluated and inform the Strategic Plan.