

Building blocks

developing second-tier support for frontline groups

Second-tier organisations (STOs) offer infrastructure support to frontline community and voluntary groups. City Parochial Foundation and Trust for London, asked researchers Alison Harker and Steven Burkeman to look at the state of the sector in London and to recommend ways to enhance the work.

Key findings

- ▶ Many second-tier organisations (STOs), including councils for voluntary service (CVSs), face difficult issues of quality, credibility, focus, conflict of interest and overwork. A number of CVSs seem to have lost their sense of purpose and focus.
- ▶ It is likely to be increasingly difficult for CVSs and other STOs to raise funds from local authorities, primary care trusts and other statutory funders, given the pressure on those bodies to show that money is achieving improvements in public services. The role perhaps most important for CVSs – that of facilitating the voice of voluntary groups – is the one most difficult to fund.
- ▶ There is an imbalance in the amount of infrastructure provision, with small groups clearly benefiting more than medium-sized organisations. The latter, with incomes significantly into six figures, often struggle to fund their infrastructure support needs. ‘Micro’ groups, many of which operate out of ‘normal’ hours, felt they are not generally being supported by CVSs.
- ▶ There is a lack of clarity about where appropriate support for different kinds of groups at different stages of development might be found. There are many STOs but who they benefit, how they do it and when their intervention is appropriate is unclear to those who might seek their help. This encourages haphazard working in the sector. There is an imbalance between the number and type of groups wanting help, and the amount of help available, especially as the sector is growing. If all are helped, the quality of support is jeopardised. But how to select?
- ▶ Small groups in particular feel their voices are not heard and it is funders and outside agencies which decide what they ‘need’. Groups almost always indicate that what they require is funding/fundraising help – but often other problems need tackling. If they can first be resolved, then fundraising will be easier.
- ▶ Frontline groups value one-to-one help, from knowledgeable, experienced, committed, and skilled individuals/bodies which are not in competition with them for funding. This is the most expensive – but a very effective – way to provide support. These groups seek and receive support from a wide range of organisations and individuals, in addition to STOs. Many groups said they are happier with support received from those specialist organisations which understand the context in which they are working, than they are with generic providers.

Key recommendations

- For funders**
- ▶ Over time, funding should increasingly be directed to frontline groups. They will then be in a stronger position to purchase the help they need, from whichever source can best provide it. In the short term, funders should select a number of STOs – whose services are of an agreed quality standard - from which support can be purchased. This will give STOs some freedom to focus on what they want to do rather than only on those things for which grants are available.
 - ▶ However, STOs which can generate a part of their income will continue to need grant support. Using a mixture of grants and long-term contracts, funders should strengthen effective STOs to enable the provision of packages of support for frontline groups prioritised by funders.
 - ▶ Funders should be ready to assist where the need for help arises with a current grant recipient. In such cases the funder would meet the costs of support delivered by an STO with which it has a long-term contractual arrangement.
 - ▶ Funders will need to accompany the move towards putting ‘purchaser power’ in the hands of frontline groups by supporting a process of education about the significance of the role of STOs – especially CVSS – in promoting the voice of the voluntary sector.
 - ▶ Funders should consider cooperating on a small-scale pilot focussed on the support needs of medium-sized organisations. Funders should also cooperate in initiating regular gatherings of different frontline groups focusing on what they want/need in order to strengthen the sector and its work.
 - ▶ The requirements of funders in relation to impact assessment, outcomes and apparently elaborate monitoring and evaluation can force frontline groups to

Background

This study, commissioned by City Parochial Foundation (CPF) and Trust for London (TfL), explores the extent and quality of support for small and medium-sized frontline voluntary and community groups in the capital which is provided by second-tier organisations (STOs) such as councils for voluntary service (CVSS) and specialist umbrella bodies.

Many funders allocate significant resources to second-tier organisations which offer support to frontline groups. But in doing so, questions arise such as:

- To what extent is the funding being allocated to second-tier support services, value for money?

- Is the work of the STOs funded by these grants of a sufficiently high standard?
- Are STOs meeting the needs of frontline groups, especially those most in need of support?
- Where are the gaps? and
- What effect has the investment in STOs had on the ultimate beneficiaries of frontline groups?

This study focused on the experiences of groups with an annual income of up to £250,000 in seeking and receiving, or failing to receive, the support of STOs. It explored the extent to which the support received is appropriate and sufficient for their needs.

seek STO support. Such requirements are often too sophisticated and burdensome for smaller groups. Funders should work through the Association of Charitable Foundations and London Funders to create norms and expectations whereby small groups will no longer have to behave as if they are major organisations.

For second-tier organisations

They should:

- ▶ regularly seek feedback from frontline groups which currently – or potentially might – use their services, to establish what they would find helpful;
- ▶ clarify who they aim to benefit, and how, and at what point their intervention is helpful, and then work with others to make effective referrals to more specialist STOs or advisers. This could mean reducing the numbers worked with to ensure quality;
- ▶ provide phased training based upon the developmental needs of frontline groups;
- ▶ consider offering an outreach and out-of-hours service;
- ▶ with the support of funders, ensure that staff working with frontline groups are experienced and skilled and that the status and salary of such posts is enhanced accordingly;
- ▶ as far as possible, provide one-to-one support;
- ▶ beware of competing for funds against those whom they exist to help.

The study was undertaken against the background of:

- a rapidly expanding sector, especially in terms of smaller groups. There are now 24% more registered charities in London than there were in 2002 and more than 40,000 voluntary and community groups in the capital (in the authors' view, this growth is not entirely a positive development and is not sustainable);
- a large and diverse range of organisations providing second-tier support;
- government policy, originally designed to make the voluntary and community sector fit for delivering public services through

initiatives such as FutureBuilders, the Compact, ChangeUp, the Hubs and Capacitybuilders;

- mixed opinions about the quality of infrastructure support in London;
- patchy provision of second-tier support.

ChangeUp is of particular significance in the context of this study. Though of great relevance to STOs, many of the frontline organisations interviewed had not heard of it. ChangeUp funding at London borough level is very small, so the difference that ChangeUp makes is likely to be more to do with process and with the way in which voluntary organisations work together.

Methodology

A desk-based review of activity in this field was carried out and interviews were held with more than a hundred frontline voluntary groups in 11 inner and outer London boroughs; second- and third-tier organisations; funders; and other key individuals.

Full report

Building blocks – developing second tier support for frontline groups is available from City Parochial Foundation (address below), or can be downloaded in PDF format from www.cityparochial.org.uk/cpf/publications

About the authors

Alison Harker worked in social and community development work in London and the north east and later as Senior Grants Officer for City Parochial Foundation and Trust for London, and Atlantic Philanthropies. She is now a freelance consultant working with voluntary organisations and charitable foundations.

Steven Burkeman has worked in education, welfare rights, local government and the NHS. From 1982, he was Trust Secretary of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, which he left in 2001 to become a consultant. His clients include leading foundations and human rights organisations.

About City Parochial Foundation (CPF) and Trust for London (TfL)

Established in 1891, CPF is one of the largest independent charitable foundations in London. It aims to enable and empower the poor of London to tackle poverty and its root causes, and to ensure that its funds reach those most in need.

Its sister body TfL, set up in 1986, aims to support small and emerging voluntary and community groups.

Occasionally, they fund research – as with this report – when it increases knowledge of these areas of work or other aspects of poverty in London. A particular interest is in work which has a clear application to policy and practice.

www.cityparochial.org.uk
www.trustforlondon.org.uk

6 Middle Street London EC1A 7PH
Telephone: 020 7606 6145
E-mail: info@cityparochial.org.uk

Charity Registration Numbers: CPF – 205629 and TfL – 294710

January 2007