

Research Brief: The Strength of Voluntary Projects in Worcestershire

Voluntary Groups across the county are tackling challenging problems and succeeding where others have failed or where no other resources are made available. New initiatives are encouraged by many funders and sometimes the hype or reports of success become exaggerated. The purpose of this research is therefore along three strands:

- To identify as many projects as possible which are in some sense unique or innovative in their approach or in their achievement – *the Long List*
- To evaluate by survey their success as objectively as possible, quantify and describe it. At this stage a review with Worcestershire Voices Chair will agree a cut off standard for cases rating more detailed review – *the Short List*.
- To evaluate the potential of the Short List for replication and its relevance to other groups or locations in Worcestershire.

.....and feed the results forward into a dissemination programme.

The Background to this project is a request from the sector as expressed at the Voices Conference *Sharing our Strength*¹ in December 2016 in the belief that local communities will be fundamentally strengthened by local communal action if successful projects multiply. But it is recognised that simply copying what others are doing or claiming every local project which receives voluntary or monetary support is a “success” will create a false picture and waste, or demotivate, scarce resources available. Many schemes are already franchised or packaged as “best practice” but then go on to fail or barely succeed in different locations. Inevitably key factors for success are rehearsed:

- Enthusiastic leadership
- Motivated volunteers
- Adequate finance
- Flexible approaches and adaptability to changing need or circumstances

But other critical factors are not always reported:

- The relative significance of the project to the community
- The nature of the sponsoring body or partnership
- Availability of and dependency on professional input

This project will need to expand these lists of criteria with the aim of creating a blue-print which can be adapted to any community and used to guide and assist those organisations that are committed to serve them.

It should be noted that the purpose of this project is NOT to develop projects to meet the requirements of local commissioners or public sector demands. Existing groups may well need help in adapting to face those demands and fit with funders requirements but that is not what this project is about. It is rather to identify the essential characteristics of projects which volunteers and community groups (both existing and

¹ Report on the Worcestershire Voices website at

http://worcestershirevoices.org.uk/uploads/documents/Conference_2016/Conference%202016%20-%20-%20Final%20Report.pdf

as yet unformed) are uniquely equipped to address. Projects should strengthen their communities and ideally address the greatest need within them which is beyond the reach of statutory provision.

Examples do abound: Communities have reopened pubs because they felt a social meeting place was essential for their village's continuance; others have been energised around the idea of accessible supplies and established community shops; around the need for children's playgrounds or youth facilities; or an environmental project. In other areas time-banks have facilitated sharing of skills or simply application of time to baby-sitting provision or visiting isolated people. In other communities of need, projects have been designed to assist parents of disabled children, or supporting the terminally ill. Much of what we see now as essential social services or the work of major charities began like this.

So we are not looking for rarities – unique ideas for unique situations however real they are - because they cannot grow or be replicated. We are looking for the things which characterise a type of work which can succeed, sustainably, in many communities (not necessarily defined by geography) and be effectively described, initiated and evaluated in terms of social value to enable a resurgence of voluntary energy to flow in Worcestershire.

This work chimes with the national view recently underlined by NCVO in their Annual Report *The Road Ahead*² which emphasises the vital role of Charities in the 'shared society' and the unique power of volunteers and voluntary organisations, and the fundamental role they can play in facing up not only to their individual circumstances but also to the wider societal challenges that Brexit, globalisation and demographic change will pose. This "uniqueness of the sector, and its volunteers, will continue to be its greatest strength as people connect and work together in building a truly shared society."

Resources for this Project include emails and contacts with the various organisations throughout the county, the report of the conference listing some of the projects already highlighted, and access to our channels of communication for surveys and researches.

Researchers will be expected to have some knowledge of the area and to strengthen the proposals with any particular insights or sources of information.

Timescales: The project should be commenced as soon as possible after selection – and extend over no more than 3 months including interim review of the Long List, and drafts before the final report. The aim is therefore to **begin no later than w/c 1st May and publish results by the end of July.**

Proposals: should indicate on no more than 3 sides of A4 a detailed approach and time commitment along with costs of each phase. Candidates will be expected to provide relevant examples of earlier work and professional references and short-listed individuals will be invited for interview. Summary reports of earlier work and CVs may be attached.

The budget cost for the entire project is £3000 but lower costs will be welcomed and if value for money is supported higher bids will not be excluded.

Submissions should be made by email to admin@worcestershirevoices.org.uk and received no later than 7th April at which point an interview date will be made known later in the month.

Please contact Michael Hunter, Chair of Worcestershire Voices, for more information:

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² Summary report at

<http://d17vezifcaj792.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/NCVO-the-road-ahead-report-2017-summary.pdf>

Questions, Answers and Points of Clarification

Question 1

The ITT talks about a long list and a short list of projects. To aid our calculations, could you please provide a rough idea of how many you think might be received at the outset for assessment (long list) and how many projects you would like on the short list for more detailed investigation.

Answer 1

It is difficult to give a definitive answer but our best guess is that we would look at a long list of no more than 20 but there might be a first stage weed out if we got many more than that. We would aim to be refining information to make case studies from perhaps half a dozen.

If we ended up with more worthy of report we would consider extending the project.