

The Voluntary and Community Sector in Worcestershire: thriving in the new world?

Throughout history people have come together to establish voluntary groups or take social action. Civil society as we know it is founded on such commitment and philanthropy addressing issues such as education, sports, social care, heritage, conservation, science and a myriad more. From the late 19th century onwards the State became increasingly involved in this work culminating in a focus on social welfare with the Beveridge Report of 1942.

Most of us have grown up in the post Beveridge welfare state and this experience has informed our mental model of the responsibility for social welfare. It is predicated on the notion of the locus of control and resource sitting with the State; with central and local government providing strategic direction, authority, lines of accountability and the majority of financial resources while the VCS provides the majority of the human resource and energy of volunteers. In this model the VCS plays an important role but one that is ancillary to that of the State. Certainly there have been significant exceptions such as the Hospice movement and RNLI but these have been special cases.

A consequence of this has been a tendency toward a state of dependency, not simply financial but often a sense that the sector needs permission to engage in activities that are seen as within the purview of the agencies of the State. There have, of course been many areas where there has been little or no State engagement and the sector has remained quite independent and free standing. These areas are extremely important but the thinking in this paper focuses on the social welfare aspects and other areas where there has been massive State involvement.

For good or ill this model is now out of date. An emerging market focussed political philosophy combined with a massive reduction in public finance demands a fundamental revision of the way we think about the VCS. We have to grasp the extent to which the State is stepping back, not only from the delivery of public services but also from a responsibility for their very existence. It is inevitable that our mental model will lag behind the reality of a rapidly changing environment but if the VCS is to realign itself to face the new realities it must step beyond the old model and take its proper place in the new order.

There is, in both government and society at large, a vague assumption that gaps will be filled by the VCS, but whilst the sector has the latent capacity to step up, this capacity is some way from being realised, particularly given the scale of the potential demand.

There are shining examples of where the gap has been filled – in some cases improving on what went before and at a lower cost. However we know that such success is hard won and often geographically or context specific – generalisations from these successes are dangerous. If the sector is to step up to fill a widening gap there is a need to develop new ways of thinking including collaborative solutions and transformations in efficiency.

One crucial issue is that, as with the micro and SME sectors of the business economy, there is little effective collaborative force in the sector. In the business economy we can live with this, indeed the competition it generates is a positive force. But the organisations of the VCS are not in competition and success is not achieved by raising and fulfilling demand. The principles of the market economy cannot apply.

In the past there have been moves to “organise” the sector but these have always failed. This failure has been accommodated because of the fundamental Parent – Child relationship between the State and the sector which has to a greater or lesser extent, resolved the issues. But the parents are moving away and the child has grown up! The VCS must recognise this and behave accordingly.

One of the great strengths of the VCS is its diversity for in that diversity lays a deep and often visceral understanding of the issues to be addressed, with solutions driven by that understanding which no central organisation could ever have. But there is a paradox which is amplified by the new reality described earlier. This paradox is that whilst we must retain the diversity of the sector we must also align its activities to increase efficiency and effectiveness and also influence the strategic direction at a local, regional and national level.

The sector has to realise that it does not face a choice between *independence* and *dependence* but that success lies in grasping a model of *interdependence*. To do this the sector needs to have a powerful vehicle for internal debate and external presentation of issues. This demands a recognition that all parts of the sector need to commit a proportionate amount of time and effort to this endeavour and, at times, understand that some local objectives may have to be subordinated to the greater achievement of the whole.

The good news is that we do not need to start from scratch. There are existing vehicles which can help to deliver. In Worcestershire we have organisations such as Community First, Worcestershire Voices, Worcestershire Community Foundation, Young Solutions, etc. whose *raison d’etre* is to support the sector. These organisations need to set the direction of travel by making a bold and unequivocal assertion of their direction of travel and commitment. Such a commitment will be helpful but on its own it will not do the job.

There is a need for all the key players, not only in the VCS sector but right across civil society, to explicitly recognise the new reality and in particular their interdependence, and commit to sharing resources and expertise and developing their capacity to step up to the huge challenges of the new reality. This must be a genuine commitment born of an appreciation of the new environment and demonstrated by appropriate behaviours.

The Worcestershire Partnership has already moved away from the previous hierarchal arrangements to become a network of interconnected partnership groups with the VCS thoroughly integrated. There is great potential in this model, but that potential needs to be exploited.

We have the genesis of a new approach which is better developed in Worcestershire than in most other parts of the UK. Our challenge, and the purpose of this paper is to suggest that we need to take the next steps to develop the practicalities of this new approach and dialogue and redraw our mental map of civil society to allow us to navigate the complexities and paradox of civil society in the 21st Century.

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