

**Stockport Partnership Forum - Wednesday February 18th, 2004
Conference Report**

The Role of the Voluntary and Community Sector in Stockport

Background

The Forum had two purposes: to raise the profile of the work of the voluntary and community sector in Stockport and to look at how to support the sector's continued health and development. From previous consultations and surveys it has been made clear that many voluntary and community organisations require additional support in a number of areas. The aim of the Forum was to try and reach a consensus about how to further develop and strengthen the local infrastructure support for the sector and to help support a bid for the funding that is currently available from central government.

There were 13 workshops, each with a facilitator and scribe. There were no designated table places and it was felt that most workshops had a good mixture of people from community groups, the voluntary sector, faith groups and the statutory sector. Each workshop group was asked to consider the same issues and, not surprisingly, many of the groups came up with similar comments and conclusions.

This is a summary of the discussions. A full transcript of each discussion group is also available, please contact the Council's Policy Unit on 474 3155 if you would like a copy.

What is good about the voluntary and community sector in Stockport?

- Traditionally the voluntary sector is strong in Stockport with committed, skilled volunteers and paid workers. The sector is expanding
- Stockport's communities are being built up by community groups in response to real needs. This good news rarely reaches the press
- People are given a voice and work together to make a real difference locally
- Strong identity with Stockport as local people provide services for other local people
- Good liaison between voluntary and statutory sectors in Stockport
- Voluntary sector adds value to statutory service provision – by filling in gaps sometimes. Its adaptability makes for quick response to issues. It gives good value and is cost effective
- Young people's involvement is strong in Stockport
- Diversity of voluntary opportunities attracts diverse groups of volunteers – broad range of experiences, abilities, age groups
- Volunteer Agency offers "bureau" service – voluntary service acts as gateway into employment opportunities
- Employee supported volunteer schemes work well for some Stockport organisations and add to pool of "professional" expertise
- Stockport's Council for Voluntary Service (SCVS) is seen as strong and provides a lead for a diversity of voluntary and community groups

- Partnership working is well developed in Stockport
- Voluntary sector provides a good way of engaging with “hard to reach” groups
- Voluntary and community sector offer more freedom, within a legal framework, to tackle local need
- Faith groups and their premises provide focus for community activity and community cohesion
- Sector offers support and opportunities to disabled people

Real achievements of the sector over the last few years

- Involvement with young people eg. Youth Parliament, Youth Forum
- Inter-faith networks
- Stockport Compact – should increase lobbying power
- Increase in understanding diversity of communities
- Stockport Funding Fair
- Millennium Volunteer project
- Celebration of National Volunteer Week in Stockport
- Development of Stockport Tenants Federation has enabled tenants to have a voice
- Community involvement in regeneration partnerships
- IT developments eg. “do-it.org.uk” website, networking with Stockport Disability database
- Voluntary sector has created opportunities for people who are retired or redundant from work
- Growth and developments in voluntary sector have resulted in its being regarded as a “safe pair of hands” enabling increasing provision of services to the community
- SCVS’ role as “umbrella” organisation is recognised and services provided especially relating to funding deserve praise. Voluntary and community groups look to SCVS to communicate on their behalf with statutory sector
- Recent appointment of link officer between Stockport Council and the sector will aid development of voluntary and community groups
- Partnership working and representation on partnership boards gives a voice to communities
- Improvements in quality of life for housebound people and carers eg. home delivery of services, shopping
- Community Buildings Forum provides helpful information and co-ordination for users
- Tonight’s celebration, wide representation at the Forum and individual achievements of every group. Excellent video

Additional needs/issues identified

- Assumption that the needs of voluntary and community sector are same – they are not – voluntary sector often has national organisations, regional roles
- Some struggling community groups would like help from community development workers and information about “start-up” grants
- Funding is a problem for the sector – funders’ requirements and deadlines often seem unintelligible and complex. Short-term funding limits planning and leads to insecurity for staff and volunteers. More sustainable service level agreements and contracts were highlighted (London Borough of Tower Hamlets’ Third Sector Commissioning Strategy could form useful model) One group preferred contracts to grants
- Insecurity of funding leads to high staff loss which makes it hard to maintain stable contacts with communities
- Poor conditions in community and voluntary agency buildings lead to low morale
- Business sector poorly represented at Forum meetings – they could help to train volunteers
- One group thought community groups were not properly represented tonight and representation was tokenistic
- View expressed that sector’s reputation for stability meant its approach is rigid rather than innovative
- One group felt that data protection issues are used by other organisations to prevent progress in the sector
- Community cohesion depends on partnership, not patronage – a need to change the balance of power
- Need for more information about legal issues and health and safety
- Changes in work patterns preventing volunteers aged 30 to 60 coming forward – particularly highlighted in faith communities
- Difficulties of getting resources in deprived pockets of “wealthy” areas of Stockport
- Council housing – the way forward?
- Closing valued community assets without real consultation – we need more engagement by local people in decision-making process

What would help the sector to work better to address these needs?

- More promotion and marketing needed for sector
- Volunteering should be promoted in new ways – those with professional skills should be targeted. Employer supported volunteering should be promoted especially within Stockport Council – expert advice could be given eg. payroll advice
- SCVS needs to play more decisive role in uniting community development services provided by local authority and the Health Service
- “Buddy” schemes can help to make volunteers, community representatives feel more comfortable in difficult situations
- Community groups need long-term funding
- Capacity building needed – workers’ skills need development if they are to lead a strong third sector

- Some groups wanted more networking opportunities – some did not want proliferation or duplication of networks
- Community network would encourage communication and co-operation – not competition
- Need for proper community and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) representation on Stockport Partnership Board
- Need for directory of voluntary organisations and groups – one suggestion is to promote Stockport Libraries CISS database (community information, groups etc.)
- ICT system to be established to disseminate information – interactive system could provide links for networking – consistent IT support is essential
- Needs mapping would highlight areas where infrastructure needs building up
- Would a central purchasing system be a good idea?
- Increase circulation of “The Bridge”, SCVS’ newsletter
- Use “Civic Review” to promote voluntary sector
- Better use of “The Diary” by voluntary and community groups
- Expansion of Pure Radio to publicise local activities
- SCVS could make a bid on behalf of the sector to Corporate Officers Group to fund time-limited project to research best practice and needs of sector
- Need to emphasise economic worth of sector – a full study with figures would help to raise profile, help in raising funds etc.
- More resource sharing eg. Minibus
- Database of community property and facilities available for use

Recommendations for building up the infrastructure

Finally, workshop groups were asked to identify three priorities for infrastructure funding. From the groups which reached this point in the discussion some common themes have emerged:

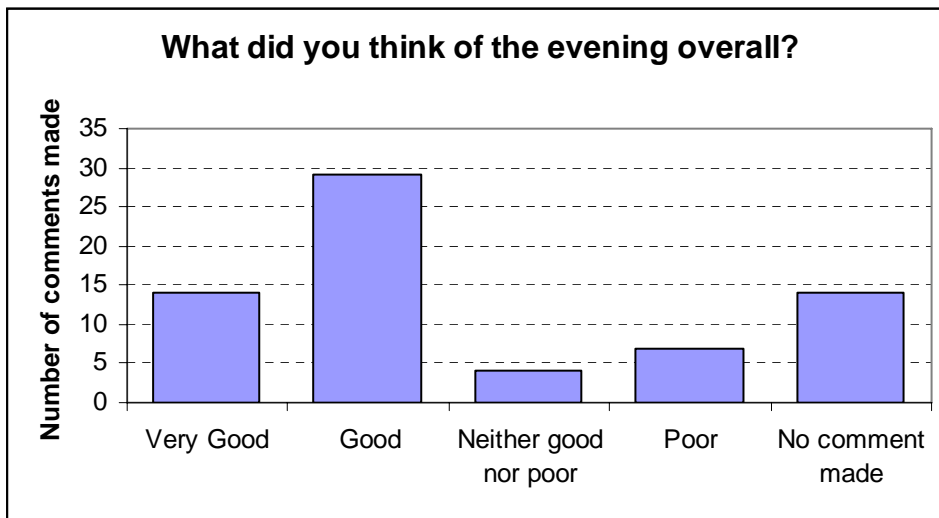
- Improved communication and marketing and promotion of the work of the sector
- More information and practical support on funding
- Funding to provide development support including work on local needs assessment

Appendix - Forum Evaluation

131 people attended the Forum and 68 of those completed an evaluation form. Questions were asked about the venue used, the video shown which helped to outline the diversity of volunteering opportunities in Stockport, the workshops and an opportunity was given to say how the delegates felt things could be improved. The following is a brief summary of the responses made:

The evening overall

64% felt that the evening overall was 'very good' or 'good' with 16% expressing that they found it to be 'neither good nor poor' or actually 'poor'.



Over 3/4 felt that the venue was suitable and the buffet tea served was 'very good' or 'good'. The comments that were made indicated that some delegates felt the venue to be cold and several that there was a need for a roving microphone, this was an issue after one of the speeches when questions were asked from the floor.

The video promoting the diversity of volunteering opportunities in Stockport

Just over half of those who responded felt that the video was 'very good' with 1/3 saying they felt it was 'good'. 10% felt that it was 'neither good nor poor'.

Speakers

Just over half (55%) felt the case studies were 'very good' or 'good' but 38% felt that they were 'neither good nor poor' or 'poor'. There were several comments made, these included:

- They could have included experiences of smaller voluntary and community groups and been more diverse.
- There were no men presenting the case studies.
- Lack of range of black and minority ethnic groups that live, work and are involved in the community sector
- Not enough emphasis on community involvement

Many comments were made about the speaker from Government Office North West. Many felt that too much jargon and acronyms were used which detracted from the value of what was being said and made it very difficult for delegates to understand. Comments were also made about the need for a roving microphone and a chair person to control the questions.

Workshops

The majority (85%) felt that the workshops were 'good' or 'very good' with only 9% saying they felt they were 'poor' or average. Respondents were also asked whether they felt the language used to convey the information was clear and straightforward and whether there was enough background information. One half of the respondents felt the language was clear and there was enough background information. Some of the comments made included:

- More time was needed to read the background information
- The language used by the facilitators was clear
- The groups were too large
- As the workshops were set-up all together in one large room there was too much distraction from other groups
- The workshops were excellent, really nice approachable people who were prepared to listen and talk in plain English and not jargon

Other things that could have been done differently:

- Would have been good to have displays on community groups
- There was a general lack of community sector involvement and representation
- There was a need for more interactive participation by delegates
- Why not ask for 'age' on the evaluation form as well as 'gender' and 'ethnicity' as young people are not proportionately represented
- Not enough 'movers' and 'shakers' from health, education and statutory sector - what does this say about the voluntary sector?