Review of Third Sector Support Services

Scrutiny of Options – Interim Third Sector Strategic Board (ITSSB)

Scrutiny Panel Final Report

November 29th 2010

1.   Purpose of the Scrutiny

The purpose of the scrutiny was to gather evidence about the relative strengths and weaknesses of the proposed options from the perspective of voluntary and community organisations in Herefordshire (i.e. the users or potential users of support services).

A scrutiny panel of six undertook the review[1], supported by an independent consultant, Alison McLean. The role of the panel was to agree the mechanisms for gathering the evidence, consider the results and feed back to the ITSSB and, on behalf of the ITSSB, to the Third Sector Support Review Group.   This report is that feedback.   It provides headline messages for the Review Group. More detailed points are contained in Appendixes as appropriate.

2.   Methodology

The scrutiny panel did not attempt a full consultation with the sector, nor did it seek to 'vote' on the options. Given the resources available and the timescales for the review, a 'market testing' approach was adopted.   A note with more details of the methodology used for the scrutiny is attached (Appendix 1).   In essence, the evidence base consisted of:

- Written evidence from the review group (including user survey, service mapping documents and Grant Thornton report).

- Views of users and potential users of support services gathered via a series of telephone interviews (18) and a focus group (7 participants).

This evidence was collated and examined against a set of five criteria agreed by the panel (Quality, Access, Equity, Scope and Value for Money). These were not the same as the criteria used by the review panel, but designed specifically to test out the perspectives of the users of the services in line with the purpose of the panel. Draft conclusions were arrived at and tested with the providers of services.   Following amendments our final comments and recommendations are detailed in the rest of this report.

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[1] Members of the panel are those members of the ITSSB that do not have a personal nor organisational interest in the outcome of the review –see Appendix 1

3. Strengths and Weaknesses of evidence base and review approach.

Strengths
- The return rate of the user survey provides a statistically strong evidence base.
- The user survey provides important data on patterns of current use, market penetration and satisfaction.
- The qualitative information (from stakeholders) is powerful, but tends to get lost in the analysis
- The mapping information provides a baseline of current services delivered and current and projected funding for services.
- The characteristics of high quality support services are defined.
- (Mostly) the framework for assessment of options is clear[2]
- Providers of services are working together to arrive at an agreed way forward for re-shaping delivery. Particular strengths are the fact that HPS resources are included in the review and trustees of local support organisations are working together to map the way forward.

Weaknesses
- The review started before CSR + other government developments (e.g. council staff co-operatives/mutuals). The external context continues to change quickly and prudence suggests a re-reference of it before any final decisions are taken, to ensure that all relevant issues to-date have been taken into account.
- The cost analysis is missing. The budget from HPS is unclear as are the costs of each option - what can we afford?
- Survey responders were self-selected (current users) and very few FLOs were consulted in the Grant Thornton stakeholder engagement. The survey cannot tell the whole story.
- There are important gaps in the evidence base and its analysis – what are the key changes needed to improve support services? Which are the priority services? Which can be cut? What can be provided from elsewhere? Will the projection for future need turn into actual demand for services?
- The leap to 'models' appears to have been taken before the necessary work on the types of services needed is complete.
- How the short list of options was arrived at is unclear - there are other options that do not appear to have been considered.
- When those with vested interests try to arrive at consensus, there may be a tendency to avoid more radical solutions.
- The Scrutiny Process itself has been working under significant constraints, particularly in terms of timescale. Grant Thornton final report was not available in time to be thoroughly considered.

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[2] With the exception of 'strategic fit' which the Scrutiny Panel feel is rather ill-defined

3.   Evidence from Scrutiny Panel 'testing' FLOs

Below are the highlights of what people told us when we asked them about the key five criteria that we used to consider the options. More detail of the responses can be found in Appendix 2 and 3)

Quality
- Clarity and visibility of support services needs to be improved– organisations do not know what is available or where to go.
- Well targeted, filtered information for a differentiated market is needed to meet the needs of a hugely diverse sector.
- Quality advice and information (professional and knowledgeable) is needed rather than trying to cover all aspects less well.
- National and regional support and private sector services should be well tied in (sign-posted). FLOs use these sources of support regularly.
- Organisations want a service that supports groups/communities to do what they want to do (driven from the front line).

Access
- Local 'fixed' provision of support services is not as important as the review papers suggest - although face to face engagement should be an option for some services.
- Exclusive dependence on electronic services (internet/email) may mean very small, community based organisations miss out.
- Good access depends on excellent and integrated info/marketing tailored to the different needs of different types of organisations.

Equity
- Equity is about communication tailored to different needs
- The world of infrastructure organisations feels remote to many organisations (e.g. a perception that many did not understand what the user survey questionnaire was about).

Scope
- Support requirements are very broad, as are types of 'users'
- Support services should include - advice, information, support (as listed in review papers). Also confirmed as important:
     Brokering with public sector/private sector
     Managing grant programmes
     Brokering and networking between Third Sector Orgs
     Providing a voice and raising the profile of the sector
     Providing, promoting and enabling Community Development (which is a different activity to generic advice)

Value for Money

- Most would have no objection to membership fee - geared to level of income. But with clarity about what it buys.
- Many expect to pay for some services.
- There are opportunities to reduce duplication.
- FLOs can share resources and facilities (bartering/mentoring), support services could facilitate this exchange.
- The aim should be to maximise money to FLOs delivering services.

4. Scrutiny Panel key points on Options[3]

Option 1
This option has the potential to provide a single access point and more coherent delivery and so address issues of clarity, visibility and co-ordination of provision BUT

- The creation of a monopoly may mean that the central organisation dictates the shape of services (rather than be responsive to needs). How would it be accountable?
- The single entity could just be another layer.
- The scrutiny panel expressed concerns about the joint venture model. It is difficult to see how it will deliver support services effectively and efficiently.
- Reduction in cost and duplication is not guaranteed – it will depend on how the entity is set up.

Option 2
This option will have less transitional cost and would be easier to implement. Also commissioning services provides more flexibility to meet the changing needs of the sector BUT

- Who is going to be on commissioning board?
- How would it operate? There is an assumed cost to the independent board, it will need an officer base to support it to research sector needs, let contracts and monitor services.
- This option does not really change the current pattern of delivery (and so does not address issues of fragmentation/coherence).
- It is unclear how cost will be taken out of the provision of services (review papers suggest that this is a pre-condition.

Option 5
The positives and negatives of the 'hub' are the same as in Option one. In terms of the locality spokes, community development resources are important. Localities could be a vehicle for supporting communities to become self-supporting and this option responds to the current government's focus on local delivery BUT

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[3] Given the decision by the Review Group to put aside Options 3a, 3b and 4 the Scrutiny Panel confined its deliberations to Options 1, 2 and 5

- This could be an expensive option for little benefit, especially it involves accommodation and permanent staff as papers suggest.
- The evidence for what services should be included in the local spokes is not clear.[4]
- The range of support services that could be delivered in each location is limited. Would this be able to serve the diverse needs of third sector organisations? How will the right balance between what is co-ordinated at the centre and what is delivered in the spokes be judged?

6.   Key Messages for the Review Group

The Scrutiny Panel would like the Review Group to consider the following key messages when taking the next steps in the Review.

Be brave - Make a change for the better.

- There is a need to make a radical change to reduce costs and increase effectiveness – the services should be seen to be different and better. Grasp this unique opportunity to make the changes needed for the longer term. Take a 'staged' approach, with a clearer vision of the outcomes sought and with timetabled steps along the way. Avoid a 'phased' approach that seeks to evolve the service, but with unclear final outcomes.
- There is a need to prioritise - it is not possible to be all things to all organisations. Be clear what is and is not going to be delivered. Focus on delivering services in response to evidenced need.
- A centralised and simplified initial access point appears to be a priority, as is much improved marketing and communications.
- Community development resources are important at a local level, but not necessarily a general, 'fixed'[5] access point for support. Different solutions for different localities will be needed.

Be clearer what is within the range of the 'possible'

- The review appears too based on the past. The world has moved on rapidly and there is a need to look to the future. The service needs to have the capacity to continuously reinvent itself.
- Clarify the scale of budget available from HPS and HPS commissioning intentions.
- Avoid adding an additional 'layer'.
- Actively manage the transition. Avoid a hiatus in service delivery, losing the value of volunteers or of successful specialist services, in the push to re-configure delivery.

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[4] Evidence in user survey and in Scrutiny Panel discussions with FLOs
[5] The Option suggests for example, accommodation costs. A permanent physical presence may not be the best solution.

Refine the options taking into account the following issues

- Refinements to the options could include:
  - other geographical models (sharing functions across LA boundaries)
  - a model that combines a central hub (services that need to be co-ordinated at the centre) with commissioned (specialist) services (that need to be flexible) - something between Options 1 and 2
- Governance and accountability arrangements are critical – where exactly will the leadership lie? How will those strategically responsible for shaping/commissioning services be accountable to users/potential users of services? What could/should be the role of the Third Sector Board in representing FLO interests in the commissioning process and elsewhere[6]?
- It would be useful to also consider a more integrated role for other local (funding) agencies (such as Herefordshire Community Foundation, the trusts administered by the Council and faith communities) in the new landscape.[7]

Step up communications with Front Line Organisations

- Excellent communications and marketing are critical to reaching out across the diversity of the sector and responding to the changing needs of the sector.
- Communications and feedback to FLOs on the review itself are needed - the changes that are proposed/decided upon, transition arrangements, implications for local organisations should be promptly and clearly communicated.

November 29th 2010

Members of the Scrutiny Panel
Margaret Andrews – Campaign for the Protection of Rural England
Rob Garner – Family Drug Support and Bulmer Foundation
Claire Keetch – Citizen's Advice Bureau
Dave Marshall – Bulmer Foundation
Penny Southwood – HALO Leisure Services
Julie Wilson Thomas – HELP

Declaration of interests:
David Marshall - Independent Examiner of the Alliance's accounts
Rob Garner – Bulmer Foundation has submitted funding bid to LEADER – Community First would be delivery partner.

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[6] Assuming that the TSB becomes the acknowledged focal point for the voice of the sector in the County (not just in relation to support services, but more widely).
[7] Herefordshire Community Foundation made a request to be more closely involved in the next stage of the review.