

Report from the Mapping Exercise

General Issues Relating to CVS Input

Information relating to the services currently being offered by the London CVSs can be found in the directory listings. These specify at a very broad level of detail the number of groups within the borough and the organisation or capacity building work being undertaken by the CVS, including any existing ICT support services.

This section looks at some of the common themes and issues that presented themselves during the data collection that may influence the shape of the final strategy.

Lack of Clarity Over Key Terms

For some respondents the term ICT development & support was strongly associated with fixing machines and providing day to day technical support. In the ACU's September 2003 consultation document however, "a lack of affordable technical support" was only one element amongst five other key issues identified as requiring a more strategic approach in the VCS sector¹. The term "Circuit Rider" is a shorthand phrase used to describe a range of approaches to tackling several of the key issues identified in the ACU document, including capacity building support, and strategic training for managers. This understanding may not be widely shared, as some people understand it to be predominantly concerned with the provision of cheap or free technical assistance.

A similar problem might exist around the concept of "Circuit Rider development" which might mean either the development of the Circuit Rider movement, (this might entail lobbying, educating and a policy role designed to "mainstream" funds towards ICT strategic support), and the development of particular Circuit Rider projects which would deliver services to agencies on the ground.

It will be important for the eventual success of the strategy that key concepts and terms have a greater shared understanding amongst those working with or accessing services being developed by the strategy.

Size Issues

Several of the CVSs identified that a large percentage of the groups in their area had no paid staff and were operating from their own homes. These micro sized groups present a particular problem in that they are hard to reach, take up disproportionate resources and may well be too early in their own organisational development to benefit effectively from ICT support. An alternative view is that simple and timely advice can alleviate problems occurring at a later stage for those few micro groups that grow into small group status.

During the survey, it became apparent that there is a difference in view between CVSs as to how much support should be offered to these ultra small groups. Some propose excluding them altogether and concentrating the limited resources on the more established groups, whilst others want to develop additional support materials specifically for the ultra small groups requirements.

The Steering Committee need to decide whether this section of the user group should be included in the strategy or whether an entry level should be set. One such suggestion was that groups must have premises and some grant aid (i.e. but could still be all unpaid).

VCS Coverage

The CVSs offer considerable coverage of the voluntary and community sector organisations in their catchment. Many CVSs work with approximately one third of the groups in their area, and have the means to contact even more. Both the national and local ICT strategies will undoubtedly be producing substantial amounts of information materials. By making effective use of both the newsletter paper based and electronic distribution methods the London strategy should seek to

¹The other key issues were: a) a lack of strategic understanding of ICT at senior management, b) few sources of advice which are knowledgeable about both ICT and VCS, c) funders undue emphasis on capital expenditure and d) a lack of co-ordination of VCS purchasing power.

ensure that the information gets to the groups rather than waiting for the groups to access the information.

Given the level of demand for support and need for information will be far greater than the resources available to deliver it, it may be worth considering targeting a large number of the harder to reach smaller groups with an information campaign, disseminated through the CVS contact lists.

Organisations Working with Particular Client Groups

Consideration should be given to how strategic partnerships could be built with other second tier support organisations working with black, minority ethnic and refugee (BMER) groups, and also with other potentially marginalised groups, such as those working with disabled people.

These groups themselves are likely to cross over CVS regional boundaries, and therefore support based purely on location may not be appropriate. Groups with a shared interest and ethos may also gain more benefit by working with and sharing ideas amongst their own networks, and may prefer this model of support rather than one based purely on location.

The steering committee should ensure that the strategy provides some types of outputs that can be accessed by other specialist second tier support providers, and their member agencies.

ICT Skills Training

The CVSs when providing information relating to their current projects or other resources available in the borough frequently mentioned the availability of ICT skills training. This training tended to be available via the local implementation of government employment initiatives or through on line learning centres and their successors. The training covered the main Microsoft office suite software packages and was offered at a range of levels.

Several CVSs also mentioned they had access to their own ICT training suites, or training facilities were available within the borough. There appears to be an abundance of skills level training, and a reasonable supply of training venues.

The steering committee might want to consider making better use of the available training resources by developing intermediate level courses on ICT strategic planning issues, which were mostly absent from the skills based courses currently available.

In a similar vein, some CVSs mentioned organisational capacity building courses were delivered via local partnerships with colleges and further education. The creation and promotion of a full syllabus covering organisational capacity building and ICT strategic development topics that could be delivered in partnership by CVSs and local education providers should be explored.

CVSs' Own ICT Needs

Several CVSs identified that as small to medium sized organisations they had their own ICT support needs that were largely not being met. This was particularly problematic given the role of their organisation required effective communication and dissemination of information, which meant they needed effective databases, Internet access, a web presence and so forth.

Some CVSs saw the infrastructure monies as a means of addressing this shortfall in their own capacity, and they argued that once they were more effectively organised they would be able to deliver improved infrastructure support.

A number of respondents pointed to their own existing internal ICT worker as a potential resource for delivering external ICT support. In some CVSs the worker already has a split role and combines in-house technical support to their own CVS, with an outward facing role to the sector. Other CVSs proffered this as a model for solving their ICT needs and at the same time offering the CVS some additional resource.

It was also suggested that many ICT support workers within CVSs (and therefore presumably other medium sized VCS groups) have their own support needs and suffer from the common problem of being isolated in their own organisations. Several respondents mentioned the creation of a cross-London ICT support workers forum where peer support, information exchange and access to materials would help combat the isolation experienced.

One CVS discussed their experience of having made unsuccessful applications to deliver ICT development and support services. They felt their lack of success was partly due to not having a track record in the provision of ICT support services. They felt that strategic partnerships with recognised specialists who could act as project sponsors, thereby offering some level of project oversight might have helped secure the funding at a local level. The project sponsor idea is further detailed on page 6.

Current ICT Development and Support Services

Across London of the 29 boroughs that have responded, 13 have access to some form of ICT support service to groups in their area. The majority of these services were being provided by sub-regional partnerships (West and South) although a number of CVSs had their own borough wide services.

West London

This project is an initiative of the West Sub Region. Currently Ealing, Hillingdon and Hounslow share access to two IT workers providing "Healthchecks" – introductory pieces of ICT consultancy work – to 45 groups with follow up ICT capacity building services. They have provided thirty strategic-level training events as well as more general information seminars, and provide access to a telephone helpline one day per week. Plans include the development of an e-volunteering scheme with local large ICT companies who will provide online discussion and expert advice. Some additional services are available within two boroughs paid for locally.

Community Cohesion funding has enabled the provision of a Circuit Rider project, giving ongoing IT health checks, support and development services to two groups in each of the six West London boroughs. This project is run by Hillingdon Association of Voluntary Services. Community Cohesion funding has also paid for HAVS to put a database of refugee groups in West London onto the Internet as a searchable directory (www.reap.org.uk). HAVS design websites and databases for voluntary groups and have created a database-driven website to enable the sharing of information on training opportunities across West London (www.westlondonnetwork.org.uk).

Superhighways Partnership

Superhighways Partnership (SHP) has worked since 1998 with organisations in Merton, Kingston and Wandsworth. SHP initially provided a hardware and software loan for over sixty organisations: they then supported these systems and provided training in how to use them. In 2000 SHP expanded its services, offering member organisations technical support on hardware and software other than that loaned by SHP, providing phone and email advice and consultancy services, and expanding its programme of training. SHP has currently expanded further, and has funding to the end of 2004 to provide services in Croydon, Sutton and Bromley: a member of staff in each borough is working intensively with six agencies, and providing services to other organisations referred by the local CVS. SHP now works closely with the South London Subregional Partnership when developing its services, and has developed a good working relationship with the Learning and Skills Council that covers South London.

CVSs Providing ICT Services

Examples of the services offered by individual CVSs include:

- Providing ICT Healthchecks and follow up support with access to a telephone helpline. Where possible signpost to additional services. On average provide this service using one day for healthcheck and one day for follow up visit over a month period.
- Acting as a resource bank offering groups recycled computers and assisting them to connect to free Internet services and work alongside UK Online to promote access to courses.

- Have trained 6 groups over a 9 month period to reach the ECDL with weekly 3 hour sessions (ECDL is a widely-recognised basic-level ICT qualification). Provide web design service and telephone support (2 hours per week plus email queries) as well as being the in-house technical support to CVS.
- Acting as resource bank offering loan of 14 laptops. Provide PC workshops offering hands-on support, training and website design. Offer telephone advice and troubleshooting service. Coordinate volunteers and facilitate borough-wide ICT forum. Starting to develop ICT Healthchecks as stand alone social enterprise consultancy.

Lasa

London Advice Services Alliance (Lasa) provides a range of ICT services to the voluntary sector, in particular to organisations with a social welfare law focus. Lasa runs Rightnset, the welfare rights website for advice workers, and Multikulti, where advice materials are available in ten community languages; the organisation has also developed AIMS, a client contact database for advice and information providers. Lasa has run a Circuit Rider project since 2002, which seeks to develop use of ICT in some twenty organisations. Lasa also plays a leading role in developing the UK Circuit Rider movement. Lasa produces *Computanews*, a bimonthly magazine on ICT for small voluntary organisations, and a range of *Computanews Guides*. The *knowledgebase* is an online resource including over 150 articles about ICT specifically written for the voluntary sector. Staff also provide training, particularly on Managing ICT, and consultancy services – including the “ICT Healthcheck”, a brief piece of consultancy work.

Brixton Online

Brixton Online (BOL) provides ICT services to the community and small business sectors. BOL is an ECDL Accredited Test Centre, a Microsoft Certified Partner and a Cisco Systems Partner. As well as a monthly Business Club, BOL provides web development and consultancy services. BOL is involved in many voluntary sector ICT projects in Lambeth and Southwark, including the Lambeth Wireless Project and Elephantlinks.

CVSs Not Currently Providing an ICT Service

CVSs were asked to consider whether they should include ICT development work in their overall approach to capacity building and organisational development. They were then asked to identify how the service might be delivered and whether they foresaw any obstacles.

Three quarters of respondents with no ICT services available at present felt that ICT development work should form part of the CVSs remit. There was very little support for the idea that existing capacity and organisational development workers should combine even basic ICT support with their current role. A far more popular model was one that assured the CVS of access to ICT support services, either via a worker/project of their own or through a shared resource.

Respondents identified the following issues:

- Preferred a partnership model of provision (e.g. similar to how some CVSs partner with Community Accountancy Projects).
- Would need access to telephone and other support services.
- All projects providing capacity building and organisational development work should have a minimum level of ICT strategy awareness. This should be sufficient to identify organisations’ needs and make referrals.
- Any additional areas of responsibility would overwhelm the capacity building and organisational development currently being undertaken.
- A clear path for referrals will be necessary if the CVS is to raise the issue of ICT development with local agencies.
- Must be convinced that the service once initiated is sustainable and that groups will be able to gain access. Otherwise would not want to raise expectations.
- Only three respondents felt that CVSs should not be providing ICT development as part of their wider remit around organisational development and capacity building. Each of the respondents would have preferred there to be a stand alone service offering ICT development support that they could call in or work with in partnership.

More specifically CVSs suggested a number of ways they thought ICT support and development work might be carried out with groups in their area. These included:

- The development of a Social Enterprise model where a profit making company offering ICT hands-on technical support services charges by ability to pay and uses the profit to subsidise ICT support to CVS groups.
- The development of the Circuit Rider model.
- The development of a syllabus that would include courses on organisational capacity building and ICT strategic awareness, run in partnership with local colleges and Learning Skills Council funding.
- Provision of a single access point to support and strategic advice.
- The provision of ICT awareness training, technical assistance, and access to telephone support.
- Need to have a minimum entry level threshold (e.g. already have funding and premises) before groups can access the support service.
- Need to include the very smallest groups with no paid staff and identify their particular needs.

Various obstacles were identified by CVSs that they felt might affect their ability to provide ICT support and development services to groups. These included;

- Premises too small (6 groups identified this issue) for any new project.
- Worries that CVS would be overwhelmed by the need once service was initiated.
- Worries that groups would not see CVS as natural provider of ICT support resulting in poor take up.
- Concerned that groups would not be aware that ICT support and development often involves change management issues.
- Worries that the very smallest groups and new BMER community groups do not see themselves as having ICT needs and will not access the service.
- Difficulties recruiting or maintaining the skill set needed to deliver ICT support and development services.

What Infrastructure Support Services Should Be Developed and Where?

There was no overall consensus as to where the infrastructure services should be developed. It was recognised that although local services were the right solution in some cases, it made more sense to deliver others at a cross-London level.

Where?

Most respondents wanted to see their infrastructure support services delivered as locally as possible regardless of where they were developed. For one respondent it was the effectiveness of the partnership rather than its location that really mattered.

Four respondents were against any cross-London provision of infrastructure support.

Some respondents believed their needs were sufficiently complex and unlike their neighbours to require the infrastructure support to be borough based.

Others said that sub-regions didn't work as the place to develop common infrastructure support services, as they had more in common with neighbours from outside the sub-regional partnership, such as better transport routes or because they shared agencies with very similar support needs.

Where existing sub-regional structures already exist and are providing ICT support services, most members of those regions wanted to see the sub-region as the focal point of infrastructure support.

What?

When asked to identify what resources or support might be useful many of the respondents suggested the need for some cross-London co-ordination to avoid duplication. The services most frequently suggested include:

- ICT worker forums offering peer support, information seminars and a newsletter.
- Telephone helpline.
- Development of a web-based library of model procedures (with training on usage and implementation) and other documents such as approved suppliers list.
- Promote the Circuit Rider movement
- Promote the Social Enterprise model.
- Provide bulk purchasing / bulk commissioning of software solutions.
- Develop specific materials and training for IT volunteers.
- Develop training courses centrally and deliver locally.
- Act as a “Project sponsor” offering project oversight, strategic and technical support, in partnership with local funding applications.
- Represent the sector to London wide funders and governmental and decision making bodies.

Potential Strategy Components

Circuit Rider Project Sponsor

Local CVSs or other networks or client group specific agencies are often well placed to offer support services, but have no track record in the area of ICT support. As a result, their bids can be weak or deemed too risky by the potential funder. The project sponsor concept could help local CVSs be more successful in their own applications.

The role of the project sponsor would be to offer assistance during the preparation of the bid, and then provide some level of management and oversight of the technical aspects of the ICT work once the project started.

This partnership approach would re-assure the funder and the project supervision costs could be re-couped from the funding application.

Improving ICT Skills of Existing Staff

Another approach might be to concentrate effort on the development of ICT strategic skills (i.e. technical knowledge, strategic planning and organisation development) of those who are already engaged with the sector to ensure the existing provision is more effective.

Within small VCS organisations, the concept of the “accidental techie” – someone who has taken on the role of ICT support although it was not their main job – is a well documented scenario. The voluntary sector frequently uses such ad hoc support arrangements, and it may be effective to try to raise the skill sets of those already doing the job as they represent a large untapped resource.

Many medium sized organisations have their own ICT support worker who may be expert in a particular area of work. However this does not mean they have the skill set required to help the agency plan and deliver its ICT objectives. This is equally true where agencies employ an outside consultant for one skill set (e.g. knowledge of databases) but then try and use them for more strategic planning purposes.

In all these examples, the development of accredited training courses targeted at improving the skill set of those already working in the sector could help improve the supply. Some CVSs reported local Learning Skills Council initiatives with local colleges that were already providing Capacity Building and Organisational development courses that were being accessed by local groups. The development of the additional syllabus and the promotion of such courses throughout London may prove an effective and financially sustainable model.

Social Enterprise Model

Several respondents have identified the social enterprise model as worth considering and one that offers some prospect of sustainability. There are already experiments with the model underway and several London boroughs have Social Enterprise development agencies which might be a potential starting point for the strategy.

There are probably numerous models but the core element requires the social enterprise to make a surplus (profit) offering ICT support services to those agencies/businesses that are able and willing to pay, in order to subsidise the ICT development work with smaller agencies.

Cross-London Telephone/Web-Based Support Service

Several respondents identified the need for telephone helpline, although different respondents were referring to different types of services using the same terminology.

The telephone helpline could cover:

- Troubleshooting for all London's VCS groups when they experience technical problems.
- Troubleshooting for CVS staff who then pass on the information (e.g. like LVSC PEACe employment law service).
- Rather than troubleshooting technical problems the helpline could provide strategic advice.

Obviously the above services could be combined with access to web-based materials and email advice. Elements of all these services are already available and are provided both by individual CVSs in their boroughs and by Lasa.

Consideration should be given to whether a single point of contact would be acceptable to VCS agencies or whether they prefer their support locally. If the service was provided centrally this could free up boroughs from the need to run their own service.

Other issues needing consideration would include: What level of support could be offered, is it for VCS or CVSs, would a troubleshooting helpline without any follow-up or referral on be of any value?

Centralised Resource Bank

Several respondents requested access to model documents and pro-forma's, e.g. Training Needs Analysis, Good Practice Guides. It was suggested that the resource bank should also provide training on how to implement the model documents. A number of respondents also requested that the resource bank held details of ICT suppliers that were approved to work with the sector.

It should be noted that a resource bank may well form part of the national strategy remit.

ICT Forum

Several respondents identified the need for an ICT workers forum. The forum offers the potential not only to share information and best practice, but to provide a service to the ICT workers who work alone in their organisation and have no access to peer support.

An ICT forum could act as a vehicle for delivering other elements of the strategy and if well constituted and run could provide valuable support to ICT workers across all of London. NCVO runs the Computer Support Workers Forum but the needs of cross-London groups and the kinds of services envisaged may require the creation of a new body or bodies with a different focus.

Stand-Alone ICT Support Organisations and Projects

A large number of respondents identified the need for a stand-alone ICT support organisation that is not the CVS that covered several boroughs. In some ways this resembles Superhighways Partnership, though this stand-alone project by a partnership of CVSs. CVSs suggested a variety of ways in which they could work with such a body, such as hosting a worker, joint work alongside any ICT resource of their own or simply on a referral basis.

The South and West sub-regions both had borough members who were hoping to join and benefit from enhanced access to the existing service. Other CVSs identified the shared Community Accountancy model resource as one they believed would offer them the correct level of access to ICT support services.

The model benefits from offering CVSs a number of advantages. The stand alone body can attract different funding streams when working in partnership across different boroughs; is able to maintain a larger skill base amongst the team of ICT workers, and can provide personnel cover more effectively than single workers based in each borough. For the many CVSs with no available space this model also offers access they otherwise would be unable to accommodate.

Strategy Formulation Issues

Use of Limited Resources

Should the money be used to extend services where an existing model is in operation, or should it be used to kick start new services where there is currently nothing?

If it is to be used to kick start a service then how much resource can be put into that project? A single Circuit Rider offering support to groups in any one borough is not strategic and will at best only support a handful of organisations. Three or four Circuit Riders in a borough might make a more effective team but is unaffordable within the ACU/GOL strategy. Targeting resources where there is currently no available service will take longer during the start-up phase and will therefore produce fewer measurable outcomes during the period. On the other hand this could be viewed as a means of pump priming a service that would then have two years to put in place continuation funding.

Placing additional resource with existing projects to allow them to increase their reach offers the benefits of quicker results, assuming the infrastructure is already in place to support the new workers. One respondent made it clear that “we have good staff, we know the problems and we know the area, all we need is the money”.

Using the ACU/GOL monies to either pump prime a new service or expand an existing one suffer from being amongst the less strategic approaches given the overall level of demand and the quite small impact any one new ICT support worker can bring (i.e. working with twenty to thirty organisations). In two years time the funding would be up for renewal with no guarantee that the model it was based on had been adopted by funders as the correct and necessary approach to supporting the VCS.

However, the existing provision in both South and West sub-regions is a major resource, a template for future provision and has the distinct benefit of being in place and ready to be rolled out. The projects currently need either match or continuation funding and will be looking to local authorities or major charitable funders.

The question for the steering committee is how much resource should it put into the promotion of the strategy itself, i.e. policy level working with the ALG, local authorities and London funders, Learning Skills Councils etc, to publicise and help co-ordinate approaches across the region.

If the strategy is actively promoted and funders buy-in to the types of support model being suggested, then access to funds will become more attainable across London in the medium term (i.e. in 12 to 24 months time). This might be viewed as a gamble, giving up access to funding today in the hope of a better funding environment later, but without it will any strategy be sustainable over time?

SMART² approach or scatter gun.

An overarching issue that needs to be considered by the steering committee is how the various elements of the strategy not only fit together, but whether they will be manageable, achievable, reportable and timely.

If the final strategy involves too many elements, and is spread too thinly across a number of proposals it could prove very difficult to meet the SMART tests.

Assuming that the steering committee is not seeking to find a “one size fits all” approach, it will need to consider just how many different strands can be accommodated without problems developing around co-ordination and management oversight. An approach with too many facets will make it harder to communicate the strategy effectively or to measure its effectiveness.

² SMART is a project management acronym for Strategic, Manageable, Achievable, Reportable (or Realistic) and Timely.