

The role of Local Development Agencies

Local Development Agencies (LDAs) are those voluntary organisations, such as Councils for Voluntary Service, Rural Community Councils and Volunteer Bureaux, whose role is to support the work and development of other voluntary organisations in their area. This research, by Stephen P Osborne of Aston Business School, explored how their work has changed since the Wolfenden Report and evaluated their current effectiveness. It found that:

- f** The overall assessment of LDAs by their local community groups was positive. Their role was seen as vital in supporting the development of a thriving local voluntary and community sector.
- f** LDAs have most impact where they pay attention to their 'catalytic' role - that is, where their work both has a visible outcome and contributes to building skills in the community to undertake other work in the future.
- f** The role of representing the views of the voluntary sector to local government is a difficult one. Voluntary groups would prefer LDAs to enable representation rather than acting as the representative.
- f** Direct service provision to local communities may meet local need and provide funding for the LDA, but it risks both the LDA being seen as a competitor for funds by other groups and being pulled away from its core work of supporting and promoting local voluntary action.
- f** Local government officers can often misunderstand the role of LDAs and see them only in relation to supporting their own departmental priorities.
- f** The researcher concludes that:
 - LDAs have an important role to play in enabling and facilitating local groups and communities to engage effectively in public-private partnerships to meet social and economic needs.
 - where LDAs secure local government funding this is best provided through the Chief Executive's Office, which has a more holistic view than individual departments of the needs of the local community.

What are LDAs?

The term Local Development Agencies (LDAs) covers those voluntary organisations which work in a specific geographic area and whose prime users are other voluntary organisations. Their role is to support and encourage voluntary activity in that area in their chosen field. The most common examples are Councils for Voluntary Service (CVSs), Rural Community Councils (RCCs) and Volunteer Bureaux. This study, based on interviews and case studies, aimed to evaluate their effectiveness.

Overall evaluation

Over 90 per cent of the voluntary groups interviewed had had contact with their local LDA. Of these, only 11 per cent had a negative view of their work. In communities where the LDAs were well-established, satisfaction rates were high. Even where LDAs were struggling to survive, local groups wanted them to become more effective rather than viewing them as irrelevant or unimportant.

LDAs worked most effectively where they could combine two levels of support. The first was **direct support** for local voluntary and community groups, and most valued were:

- training provision and facilitation,
- legal advice and support,
- funding advice and support, and
- the creation/support of local networks between voluntary and community groups.

The second level was **'catalytic' support**; this not only achieved its explicit purpose, but also contributed to building the skills of the individual, organisation, or community. Examples of this were:

- organising a training event on a specific topic (perhaps managing volunteers) which might also help to build networks between the groups attending, and
- helping a community group seek and apply for funding, whilst also building the ability in that group to undertake such searches for itself in the future.

Relationship between CVSs and RCCs

This was complex. RCCs have a concern for community development and CVSs for organisational support/development; both have a distinctive contribution to make to their communities but need to work together to maximise their impact. However, evidence from the case studies showed that such collaboration can be undermined by potential or actual competition for roles and resources and by confusion and/or ignorance about their respective roles.

This might be eased by CVSs and RCCs demonstrating to local authorities and local communities that:

- they each have their own particular strengths which will need evaluating in particular ways, and
- their greatest impact comes where their capabilities are harnessed together - being distinctive does not mean that they cannot work together.

Working in partnership

'Partnership' has become the key word of much voluntary funding. It has much to offer to LDAs, and vice versa, but the case studies showed that there can be problems with this approach:

- LDAs can become – and can be seen as becoming – more bureaucratic as a result of increased contact with government,
- not all members of the 'partnership' always have equal weight,
- partnerships may divert LDAs away from their core work,
- partners may compete, so fragmenting the sector in the pursuit of organisational interests, and
- funding may be directed to LDAs and away from the community.

LDAs might avoid these dangers by:

- being clear that any partnership fits with its overall strategy,
- ensuring that the partnership helps the LDA to work with local community representatives rather than replacing them,
- ensuring that all involved understand the same thing by 'partnership', have similar expectations about what it can achieve and are using the same criteria to evaluate its success, and
- being able to work as equal partners with other agencies, many of whom will bring greater financial resources but may rely on the LDA to bring 'legitimacy' to the partnership.

Promoting and supporting volunteering

This was a challenging area of work for LDAs. There is a wide-ranging commitment to volunteering at a national and local level. However, there were severe problems in making this commitment a reality:

- the Volunteer Bureaux in this study were invariably under-funded and under-staffed and found it hard to have an impact on their local communities,

- there was confusion as to whether Volunteer Bureaux should simply *recruit* volunteers (and if so how they related to the needs of the local voluntary and community sector) or whether they should *promote* both the ideal of volunteering in the local community and 'best practice' in volunteer management inside local groups,
- where Volunteer Bureaux existed within other LDAs, local groups often believed (though without real evidence) that CVSs used 'their' Volunteer Bureau to pick out the best volunteers for themselves; and
- where Volunteer Bureaux became involved in specific government programmes, this could both undermine their commitment to their core purpose and make them over-dependent on funding from such programmes.

Representation to local authorities

The extent to which the LDA represented voluntary organisations to the local authority was a controversial issue. Local voluntary organisations were concerned that:

- LDAs could not represent voluntary organisations' views, because they did not have the necessary specialist knowledge,
- it was inappropriate for LDAs to speak on behalf of organisations which had their own independent perspective,
- the coverage of their total possible constituency of voluntary and community organisations in their locality by LDAs was only partial and so LDAs risked giving an incomplete and misleading view, and
- LDAs risked becoming 'token' representatives, allowing local authorities to renege on genuine consultation with the community.

LDAs might help local voluntary/community groups express their own views to the local authority, rather than speaking on their behalf by:

- ensuring that information is disseminated across their communities and targeted to those groups that need it,
- using existing local networks to encourage groups to represent themselves to the local authority, and enabling groups and communities to develop the skills to do this,
- holding forums to bring these local networks together and to allow local authority members to hear voluntary groups' views, and
- putting pressure on the local authority, and assisting it, to actively seek the views of the voluntary/community sector.

Direct service provision to local communities

LDAs sometimes provide a service directly to the community (such as a Carers Support Project) rather than supporting other groups to provide a service. There can be good reasons for LDAs to take on direct service provision. Sometimes services or projects will not otherwise get off the ground. Moreover, many LDAs are unlikely to obtain important funding from the local authority without undertaking some service provision. However, the Wolfenden Committee recommended such direct service provision should be an exception rather than the rule, because of the amount of resources that it consumes and the potential for conflict with LDAs' supporting role.

This study found increased pressure from local authorities on many LDAs to provide services directly. This was especially the case where LDAs received their funding through a service department (such as social services) rather than from the Chief Executive's Office. This was because of the priorities of these departments to both provide services and to reduce costs by exploring service provision by non-governmental agencies.

Where LDAs in this study were directly providing services, the dangers feared by Wolfenden were apparent. Although service provision did attract resources, management costs did not always appear to be covered. Further, service provision often threatened to crowd out the support work of LDAs, because there were simply not enough time and resources for both. The greatest danger, though, was the extent to which direct service provision undermined the support function of LDAs, with local groups beginning to see LDAs as competing with them for resources.

Conclusions

The researcher concludes that LDAs' impact in local communities will be greatest where work is undertaken both for its intrinsic worth and in order to develop the skills of local groups and individuals further (a 'catalytic' approach). However, they also identify a number of specific strategic issues which need considering if LDAs are to be more effective:

Promoting volunteering

If Volunteer Bureaux, and other Local Development Agencies, are to contribute to the development of volunteering, two decisions are needed at the local level:

- the siting of Volunteer Bureaux. The study's evidence suggests that they are best sited within CVSs, because of the potential for co-operation. However, this then requires the CVS to demonstrate that the Volunteer Bureau is serving the needs of the local community rather than its own needs,

- the work of Volunteer Bureaux. Other recent work has suggested that they are least effective when acting as volunteer recruitment agencies alone. Rather they have had most impact both in promoting the idea of volunteering in local communities and in providing the infrastructure to encourage good practice in, and the management of, volunteering.

Dealing with direct service provision

The study uncovered a number of approaches which can minimise the negative impact of LDAs' direct provision of services:

- it should only be taken on as a last resort, when all other alternatives have been explored,
- a clear business plan should be in place for that service to become an independent organisation within a defined time limit,
- consideration should be given to establishing a separate direct service provision agency at 'arms length' from the LDA itself, to clearly separate these functions,
- steps need to be taken to demonstrate that such projects are not receiving funding from the local authority at the expense of existing local voluntary and community groups.

The relationship between local authorities and LDAs

The research uncovered a number of key themes for local government in its relationship with LDAs:

- ensuring local government has a clear framework for relating to the local voluntary and community sector in general and to LDAs in particular. The present discussion about local versions of the 'voluntary sector compact' may provide a way forward but to achieve this local compacts will need to be jointly established and owned frameworks, not local government strategies developed 'in consultation' with the voluntary sector,
- ensuring that local government officers understand the nature and work of the range of LDAs, and when and how their involvement in policy planning or service delivery is appropriate,
- considering the most appropriate place and conditions for its core funding of LDAs. Service delivery departments (such as social services) may not be the most appropriate because of the distorting effect of their own service priorities. The Chief Executive's Office often has a broader view of the needs of the community and may be better placed to relate the infrastructure and support work of LDAs to these needs.

About this study

The research for this study was conducted over eighteen months over 1997 - 1998. It involved interviews with key informants at the national level and four cross-sectional case studies of the work of LDAs in four different localities. These involved extensive interviews with the staff, users and funders of the work of LDAs in each locality - over 170 local groups were consulted in these case studies.

How to get further information

The full report, **Promoting local voluntary and community action: The role of Local Development Agencies** by Stephen P. Osborne, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 902633 17 2, price £12.95 plus £2 p&p).