

Filling the Gaps

Community needs and the provision of community development support in Didcot and Bicester (Oxfordshire)

A report commissioned by
the Oxfordshire Council for Voluntary
Action

May 2004



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GKG

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Acknowledgements

Gray-King & Gray Ltd thanks Saul and Sharon, facilitators working alongside GKG Associate, Jim Barlow. In addition, the research team included Bridget Banks, Peter Gray, Betsy Gray-King and Tom Knowland.

This report was commissioned from Gray-King & Gray Ltd by the Oxfordshire Council for Voluntary Action (OCVA) with the help of funding from the Active Community Unit (Home Office). It remains the intellectual property of OCVA and may be used with permission.

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Executive Summary

This research has identified a full and varied Voluntary Community Sector (VCO) in the county towns of Bicester and Didcot, apparently 1 VCO per 200 people in Didcot and 1 VCO per 187 in Bicester. Gathered evidence from interviews across the variety in both towns and from focus groups with VCO workers in each town suggests that these VCOs see themselves as full of local knowledge well placed to deliver needed activity. With them we looked at who, how and what issues should be addressed. They stress need for local support of an infrastructure nature, delivered in a range of flexible methods and focusing on five key issues:

- Regulations, Bureaucracy and Paperwork
- Recruitment of Volunteers
- Volunteer Skills, Liability and Responsibility
- Funding
- Premises

From this research, we therefore make the following recommendations, detailed in the following report:

Recommendation 1

We wonder whether OCVA could negotiate with banks or building societies to consider giving OCVA information to VCOs in the Oxfordshire region at the stage of setting up a bank account.

Recommendation 2

When support is planned the issue of appropriate peer support should be an explicit part of the dialogue between the deliverer of support and the recipient.

Recommendation 3

OCVA could develop its role as a facilitator of horizontal networks between voluntary and community groups. Ideally this would enable not just building links but active reflection on common issues.

Recommendation 4

OCVA needs to create a vibrant and engaging image to effectively market the sector as well as various media (web, print, video and posters) to share information.

Recommendation 5

Create a post with specific responsibility for co-ordinating the flow of information and publicity. OCVA could explore the feasibility of resourcing and hosting such a post or how to better support such a post within local authority structures.

Recommendation 6

OCVA in conjunction with other agencies should continue to lobby at national level for greater deregulation of the voluntary and community sector.

Recommendation 7

OCVA consider, with due regard to Recommendation 2, recruiting and placing potential trustees.

Recommendation 8

OCVA investigate how it can enable more skills training to be delivered to groups, whether in terms of courses or other forms of direct or peer to peer support.

Recommendation 9

Further research could be conducted into the feasibility of ideas such as "community treasurers", whether voluntary or paid, who provide support to the treasurers (and potential treasurers) of local groups.

Recommendation 10

OCVA can make fundraising support more accessible, including local delivery, such as running surgeries in the towns or making Funder Finder available as a resource locally (with training in how to use it).

Recommendation 11

Any forms of support delivered in relation to funding should engage the group in reflecting on the advantages and disadvantages of different types of funding, including maximising their non-grant / sustainable funding.

Recommendation 12

OCVA could lobby for and deliver more small grant schemes, of the "Community Chest" variety to enable smaller community groups to access funding without an oppressive monitoring and management requirement.

Recommendation 13

OCVA can continue to lobby government and major funders for a rethink of policy on core funding, confident that in so doing they are representing the views of groups within the sector.

Recommendation 14

For some groups the main benefit of a national or regional organisation seemed to be its ability to negotiate beneficial rates for things like insurance. OCVA could investigate county wide, regional or national schemes that help a) reduce costs and b) simplify procedures.

Recommendation 15

OCVA could work with local authorities and ORCC to help protect and increase the use of the resource represented by village halls and community centres.

The Question

The Oxfordshire Council for Voluntary Action (OCVA) was granted funding by the Active Communities Unit (Home Office) to undertake a research project in Didcot and Bicester. It aimed to identify the gaps in voluntary and community activity and support in both towns and to suggest ways in which the gaps might in future be filled.

The basic question for the project to answer was: 'how could voluntary and community activity in Didcot and Bicester be better supported?' 'Support' in this context meant the systems, structures and services needed to underpin a flourishing voluntary and community sector. This could include training, advice, information, networking, access to IT, funding and more.

The two towns were identified because support to the voluntary and community sector was felt to have been lacking there. The Oxfordshire Rural Community Council (ORCC) supports the sector in villages, while lack of funding from District Councils has meant that OCVA has focused on organisations in Oxford and Banbury. However, both Didcot and Bicester are set to expand rapidly in the coming years as new housing is built. The relevant District Councils (South Oxon and Cherwell) have identified the need for greater support to VCOs in their areas. This research was an opportunity to identify what sorts of support would be needed to foster a voluntary and community sector to match the expanding population.

GKG Interest

Gray-King & Gray Ltd (GKG), commissioned by OCVA to conduct this research, is a social enterprise, established in the fields of regeneration and research. In each, there is an emphasis on the transfer of skills and provision of quality information, particularly amongst some of the most disadvantaged populations. We anticipated that this research would add to our store of information for better serving those communities.

Research Strategy

We have designed a research framework and collection activity which marries two diametrically different types of research methodology. One is classic qualitative and quantitative social research methodology; preparing a comprehensive database, noting associations, counting presenting features and remarking on conclusions. Added to this is the random selection of interviewees from that database, the conduct of interviews with questionnaires designed on the basis of document search, recording of data collected, analysis and remarking on conclusions. In this methodology, it is the researcher who forms the associations, notes the presenting features and forms the questions to be asked. Respondents have room to give information outside of the questions asked, but the questions are formed by us.

The other type of methodology we designed to use sets the research agenda in the hands of those being interviewed. We designed focus groups using tools from Participatory Learning and Action (see Appendix III) which hold that the community, rather than outside experts, are the primary repository of wisdom and understanding regarding local conditions and issues. The focus group sessions were designed with no

researcher-set questions; all issues were raised by the members, linkages made by the members and possible solutions suggested by members. Researchers were to assist by facilitating the process and managing the data collection tools.

We expected, from this combination of bottom up and top down research, that we would find some very thorough information in a very short period of time.

What is a Voluntary and Community Organisation?

There is no legal definition of the word Voluntary or of Community Organisation. Used by different people and different sectors to mean different things, the working definitions are that Voluntary and Community Organisations (VCOs) work outside of statutory structures and seek to address needs that may not be met elsewhere, including the gathering together for special interest. The definition of volunteering used in the 1997 National Survey of Volunteering is "any activity which involves spending time, unpaid, doing something which aims to benefit someone (individuals or groups) other than or in addition to close relatives or to benefit the environment".

From our research, it is clear that there is a diverse VCO sector, not culturally but structurally. The voluntary and community sector label is applied to groups that are radically different. There are purely voluntary and grass roots organisations, usually coming together for some mutual purpose, largely self-financed. These often meet outside classic employment hours and are staffed largely by volunteers in spare time. Then there are "service delivery" organisations, with paid staff and a high degree of formalisation and management, with volunteers assisting in some areas of delivery or perhaps acting as managing trustees.

The National VCO picture

Voluntary and community organisations have the potential to contribute fully to local community, social and economic development and play a key role in public service delivery. This is the predominant finding from a thorough search of documents about VCOs and their capacity and infrastructure (full review at Appendix I). The literature tends to agree that they can do this by occupying a niche not filled by mainstream organisations in the public and private sectors. They are fit for this purpose and have the advantage over their mainstream partners because of their attributes of flexibility, informality, local knowledge and trust (Leat 1995, Task Force On Resourcing The Voluntary And Community Sector For Northern Ireland 2003).

However these self same attributes run the risk of being weaknesses in this sector because these attributes are often not properly acknowledged by mainstream partners as advantages. Also, there is a presumption by the mainstream that VCOs are able to deliver without recognising the capacity issues within VCOs. The documentary evidence is conclusive: VCOs need support if they are to flourish. While there is no doubt that VCOs, (as any other sector) need financial stability to survive, it would appear that there are additional forms of support that are not being met at present and that possibly mainstream organisations are not best placed to provide.

The evidence shows that it is likely that the best source of support is from other members of the same sector. Emerging roles such as mentoring and peer review (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2002, Bruce 2004) may present less threatening, more open, informal and honest forms of support that can be adapted to the needs of the organisation concerned.

The VCO picture: Bicester and Didcot

Before looking specifically at VCO activity in the towns, we look at the towns themselves. From the VCO organisations contacted through this research, we were

struck by the similarity of issues and concerns between Didcot and Bicester and find a very similar picture of two county towns. There are issues of image in Didcot:

"Shame it [Didcot] has such a dull image - I have lived here since 1950's. Didcot seems to have a downtrodden image 'not quite making it' which is not true. People don't realise what's around". (D019DCS)

Nearly half of those interviewed in Didcot expressed concerns about drug abuse and violence levels. Many people felt that youth was a concern in the town with some people feeling that this had a bearing on the violence and drug abuse concerns.

"A lot of vandalism, abuse, very frustrating [in the town]. [Our] building is often damaged [which is] very odd when it's the young people who use it"! (D050DYP)

Some people felt that the lack of amenities had an affect on the young people of Didcot:

"Major youth element; vandalism and intimidation (lack of policing) in towns and estates. [There are] insufficient activities." (D070DU5)

Though violence was not mentioned by interview respondents in Bicester, they echoed the concern about a lack of amenities, particularly for the young people and the elderly. In a survey conducted by a local Bicester minister of 249 people in a Bicester housing estate, 62% of respondents (159) appealed for more amenities and activities for children and young people. A consistent message from interview respondents in Bicester was the need for additional facilities for the growing town. Common issues cited included provision for young people, leisure and recreation facilities and services for the elderly. Affordable housing was also mentioned. Bicester was characterised as a rapidly expanding town where the population has outgrown the facilities currently available. The tone of frustration came out clearly on occasions:

"Nothing ever gets done. Stop yakking about it and do it" (BO47BOP)

People from both towns were clearly concerned about the expansion of the town through housing estates. Many felt that there had been too many houses built with too little thought to the structures and facilities needed to support such a growth in population. Yet, despite the issues mentioned and the rapid expansion of the two towns, we came away with the impression of a huge range of groups and activities taking place.

From towns to activity. To get an overall picture of the VCO activity, we merged information from a range of databases which included VCO activity in Bicester and Didcot: information from OCVA, the Charity Commission website, Stonebrook Guides (a register of community activities) and the relevant county websites. The numbers in various stages of reconciling data have gone between a combined number of 100 to 300 individuals or organisations. At one point, it looked as though there were 155 VCOs in Didcot and 140 in Bicester. However, with further data interrogation, we have arrived at a figure of 117 for Didcot and 153 for Bicester. The population of Didcot (2001 Census) is 23,453. From our information, it would appear that there is 1 VCO per 200 people. For Bicester, with a population of 28,672 (2001 Census), there is 1 VCO per 187. Though this suggests that Bicester is better served by its VCOs, our research experience was that the Didcot VCOs were more active, indeed proactive in some areas towards community development (the emerging Neighbourhood Listen).

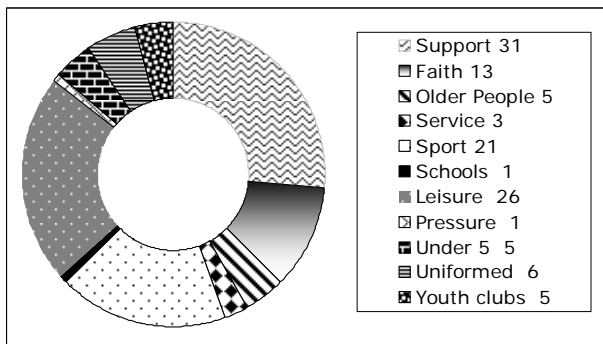
For Bicester, we found a further source of information and have added 12 VCOs to the list but could not source full contact details. From the focus groups we are aware that there may be a further 21 VCOs for Didcot and 9 VCOs for Bicester. However, as the

focus groups members indicated, there will need to be a thorough mapping exercise. We are convinced that our work so far has only gathered a part of the whole VCO picture, albeit a significant part.

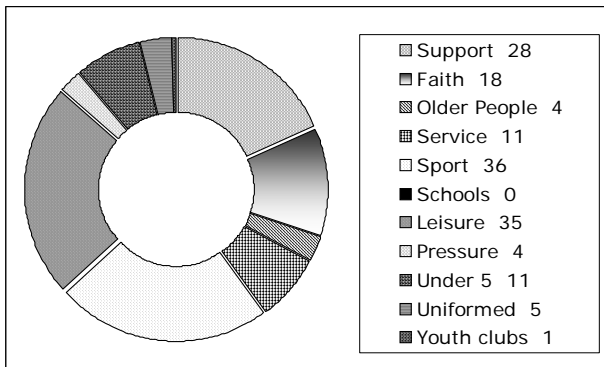
Having assembled the list, we looked to the types of organisations and presenting activities. We identified the following types of VCOs:

Activity type	Examples
Community Support and Advocacy	Citizen's Advice Bureaus, Carers Support networks, families of (illness) groups, community centres, adult training...
Faith Groups	
Older People	Age Concerns, University of the Third Age, older people's lunch clubs...
Service Clubs	Lions, Rotary, Inner Wheel...
Special Interest - Sport	Football clubs, swimming clubs, cycling clubs...
Special Interest – School related	Friends of schools, Parent Teachers Associations...
Special Interest – Leisure	Drama clubs, dance clubs, chess clubs, steam railway clubs...
Special Interest – Pressure Group	Environmental groups, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Friends of the Earth
Under age 5 activity	Preschool playgroups, playgroups...
Youth – uniformed activities	Scouts, Guides...
Youth – young people's clubs	Youth clubs, 18 + clubs, youth training...

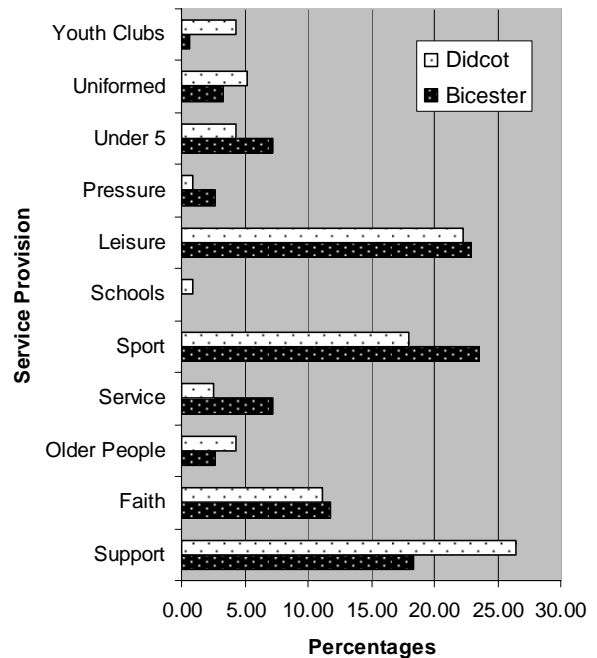
Numbers of VCOs according to activity: Didcot (total 117)



Numbers of VCOs according to activity: Bicester (total 153)



Town Comparison



We note that there are more sport activities and Service clubs in Bicester and more Community Support and Advocacy VCOs in Didcot.

Potential of the VCO sector

There is a large and active voluntary and community sector in both towns and, reflecting the national picture, the majority of respondents replied positively to the suggestion that VCOs are well placed to help communities in a way that government agencies are unsuited to:

"[The] Government need[s] voluntary organisations as the place would fall apart without our help" (B047BOP)

"Success because we work at grass roots level, bottom up rather than top down." (D004DOP)

Issues raised included the advantages of a flexible volunteering network as opposed to office-based staff working conventional hours and the benefits of locally based people with a good understanding of local issues. It is also clear that VCO respondents do not see themselves as replacing mainstream provision. Replies tended to imply that VCOs are in a position to:

"help" [mainstream organisations]: "We cannot take total responsibility, but we can take some" (B038BSC)

However, there was also a feeling that the networks and infrastructure did not exist to adequately support this activity. As one participant observed:

"Bicester is like an adolescent, tall and gangly. It has outgrown its strength. The infrastructure has not kept up". (FGD1)

Though this comment reflects feedback about the towns themselves, it also reflects feedback about the need for VCOs to be supported by something. When asked what sort of support VCOs had received to date, most replies interpreted the question as financial and cited funding sources. Yet a significant number said they had no support and others mentioned their parent VCOs. We understand from all the evidence that there ought to be an infrastructure organisation for support to VCOs. The questions are:

- Who should that organisation be?
- How should it conduct its support?
- What issues should it tackle?

Yet, just before we take those questions, we observe that an infrastructure organisation needs to know who to support. It is not surprising that we were unable to 'nail down' the whole picture. One interviewee was startled to have been found by an infrastructure organisation at all. Often groups just begin, and, if not registering as a charity or not part of a larger parent body, have no need to tell anyone other than their members or beneficiaries of their existence. We considered what activity most VCOs do at start up which would trigger information sharing and concluded it was likely to be setting up financial arrangements.

Recommendation 1

We wonder whether OCVA could negotiate with banks or building societies to consider giving OCVA information to VCOs in the Oxfordshire region at the stage of setting up a bank account.

Who?

National evidence suggests an infrastructure organisation should comprise peers of the VCOs. Our evidence shows that, when a local VCO is part of a national organisation, there is often support such as training, information and help with fundraising. However, we understand how diverse the sector is and need to consider how to support the grass roots half of the equation, without in the process changing them into the formal service delivery types of groups or forcing them into wider structures. Peer to peer support needs to be appropriate, evidenced by the focus group participants welcoming the opportunity to meet and share ideas and concerns. An interview respondent noted:

“Regular meetings of voluntary bodies would be good (Bi-monthly) share info and spotting gaps. We all work in our own field - don't realise there is a gap, or we work to fill it without realising other people are too. [There] could be more co-ordination.” (B115BCS)

We therefore suggest that the Who question is answered by a flexible group of people who know the sector from the inside, employed, contracted or negotiated by OCVA. Along with our recommendation, we add a rider from a respondent:

“Yes [we could do with help], depends on what sort of help, as long as we can maintain our independence.” (B05SIE)

Recommendation 2

When support is planned the issue of appropriate peer support should be an explicit part of the dialogue between the deliverer of support and the recipient.

Recommendation 3

OCVA could develop its role as a facilitator of horizontal networks between voluntary and community groups. Ideally this would enable not just building links but active reflection on common issues.

How?

The majority of our respondents from interview and focus group felt that support needed to be locally based. A number from each town suggested a mixture of face to face and telephone, or face to face and web-based contact. There was a helpful warning note that a mixture of support was necessary, as there is still some hesitancy about the use of Information Communication Technology.

Suggestions made included an OCVA county wide newsletter, customised for each of the major towns (some participants were confident that local groups could handle distribution) and an easy to access (and properly maintained) web site. There is some evidence in our research that this could not but help:

“First I've heard of them, [they] are not well publicised.” (B126BSID)

There could be considerable scope for OCVA to explore ways of supporting groups in this area, as it might also help a following issue – recruitment of volunteers. This could include enabling access to existing provision as well as developing new provision.

Recommendation 4

OCVA needs to create a vibrant and engaging image to effectively market the sector as well as various media (web, print, video and posters) to share information.

Recommendation 5

Create a post with specific responsibility for co-ordinating the flow of information and publicity. OCVA could explore the feasibility of resourcing and hosting such a post or how to better support such a post within local authority structures.

Issue 1: Regulations, Bureaucracy and Paperwork

A consistent plea amongst interview respondents was the need for support with resources (fundraising, equipment and premises) and the need to reduce the bureaucracy associated with accessing resources:

“Relaxation of VAT rules on fundraising and simpler administration would help” (BO38BSC).

Regulation, bureaucracy and paperwork were keenly felt as a growing burden by focus group participants:

“It’s the legislation that will choke off voluntary groups, left, right and centre”. (FGD1)

“Human beings don’t work the way legislators want them to” (FGD1)

“The Government changes things every 10 minutes...It’s all very well doing new training and updating paperwork but when can I actually spend time with the children?” (FGD2)

We considered whether it would be appropriate to resource a development post and resource pack to give groups a clear and accessible guide to their legal requirements and obligations. However, as we began to compile the list we realised how frightening it looked and that it could probably discourage people from getting involved. Such support might be appropriate for the more formal VCOs, but grass roots VCOs do not want help to comply but to be freed from the burden.

Recommendation 6

OCVA in conjunction with other agencies should continue to lobby at national level for greater deregulation of the voluntary and community sector.

Issue 2: Recruitment of Volunteers

Respondents commented on the difficulty of recruiting volunteers and committee members:

"[We need] More people, more hands" (B05SIE)

There was a recognition that VCOs tend to end up relying on older (retired) members of society, yet there was a divergence of views about the potential of the over 50's as a mainstay of volunteering; it was pointed out that many people approaching retirement do not want to take on additional responsibilities. Support was needed in recruiting younger people:

"[We] could use the old fashioned tea maker sort" (B115BCS).

"lack of new people coming in, it's a philosophy that seems to be changing, a lot of VCOs may vanish. We closed a club because it was the same people twice a week with no new people coming to help."(B126BSID)

However it was recognised that younger people already lead busy lives with little spare time. Some people felt that there was a link to the wider need to increase membership and involvement. Others felt that there was a crisis in volunteering generally due to changes in society. The decline in unemployment; the increase in two income households and the concurrent reduction of free time were all mentioned. Equally some felt there was a decline in the number of people able and willing to take on responsibilities in connection with community activity.

"Society has changed, children are looked after by someone else whilst both parents work, as if work is the be-all and end-all but it isn't."(FGD2)

"People don't do something for nothing anymore, not if they can get the chance for paid work"(FGB2)

People see the same faces in an area taking on voluntary roles. As one participant observed,

"First the toddler group; then the playgroup; then you see them on the PTA". (FGB2)

Assistance with publicity may help to improve recruitment. Publicity and promotion was seen as essential to attracting new members and existing provision was considered to be insufficient or, at least, not easily accessible. Groups would welcome help with marketing and promotion, giving a different image of volunteering and voluntary and community groups. Groups would welcome initiatives and incentives to promote volunteering in a positive light. Various suggestions were made, including better publicity for existing activity and holding fairs and fun days to promote and celebrate volunteering. Our Recommendation 4 applies to this issue.

Issue 3: Volunteer Skills, Liability and Responsibility

All participants of focus groups and most people interviewed commented on the difficulty of getting people to serve as trustees / committee members. The level of responsibility is perceived as growing more and more onerous, in terms of liability and the general level of paperwork and bureaucracy. This is seen as a major disincentive to potential committee members and trustees. The need for skilled volunteers was noted, yet, although there are professionals who offer their services as volunteers in this area, there are still issues of appropriateness and bringing in someone who is not really part of the group.

Recommendation 7
OCVA consider, with due regard to Recommendation 2, recruiting and placing potential trustees.

Recommendation 8
OCVA investigate how it can enable more skills training to be delivered to groups, whether in terms of courses or other forms of direct or peer to peer support.

Recommendation 9
Further research could be conducted into the feasibility of ideas such as "community treasurers", whether voluntary or paid, who provide support to the treasurers (and potential treasurers) of local groups.

Issue 4: Funding

Overwhelmingly, the word support was interpreted as funding first and other forms of support second. The limited availability of core funding was felt by all focus groups and by most interview respondents. One VCO folded because it couldn't afford the national subscription anymore; yet, the same group, under a different name, was able to get start up funds. People were not clear about what funding was available and who was eligible. Several people felt that the management and monitoring requirements associated with grant funding detracted from their ability to get on with activity, to the point where the benefits are nearly outweighed by the additional burdens.

"Can they fill out the forms for us?" (FGB2)

Our respondents would welcome some kind of face to face advice and mentoring in the processes of development and fund raising. Groups would welcome active advice and guidance, rather than just a list of potential funders. Advice & support would be welcomed on who to apply to and what to apply for. However, we suggest that this should be tailored to the group and include a full options analysis.

Recommendation 10
OCVA can make fundraising support more accessible, including local delivery, such as running surgeries in the towns or making Funder Finder available as a resource locally (with training in how to use it).

Recommendation 11
Any forms of support delivered in relation to funding should engage the group in reflecting on the advantages and disadvantages of different types of funding, including maximising their non-grant / sustainable funding.

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Recommendation 14

For some groups the main benefit of a national or regional organisation seemed to be its ability to negotiate beneficial rates for things like insurance. OCVA could investigate county wide, regional or national schemes that help a) reduce costs and b) simplify procedures.

Issue 5: Premises

Available and affordable premises kept cropping up as an issue. There is a polarity between older facilities and new or planned facilities in terms of cost. For example, a Civic Hall was cited as costing £20 per hour compared to a community hall at £4 per hour. This is the "shoestrings and shiny new boots" syndrome, reflecting a situation observable elsewhere: old (and often crumbling) facilities run on a shoe string by voluntary committees, offering a basic but cheap service, over against new facilities that are wonderful but cost groups considerably more to use. An interview respondent noted how the group he ran could often not hire halls, as his sort of group was seen to be sidelined; he would welcome a common letting criteria.

Recommendation 15

OCVA could work with local authorities and ORCC to help protect and increase the use of the resource represented by village halls and community centres.

In some ways, this research need hardly have been done; the emerging picture is that identified by national investigation and VCO infrastructure bodies before us. However, it is important that this work was done. It has identified not only significantly more VCOs than were previously on the database of OCVA, but has also filled out detail of the needs of the sector. It has helped OCVA to engage; through the substantial number of contacts made to recruit members of focus groups and people for interview, it has by that very process, helped to raise the profile of OCVA.

More importantly, this research has provided the hard evidence for work in particular localities. Rather than saying, "because they are VCOs, they must have these issues," OCVA can confidently state "these are their issues." We encourage OCVA to lobby with evidence. There is much here to show that increasing bureaucracy is imposing a burden almost too hard to bear. Though we agree with legislation to protect individuals, especially those who are vulnerable, it would appear that some legislation regarding finance and administration can be overwhelming.

A final note is about volunteering as an activity. Many respondents noticed the increasing age profile of volunteers, the changes in society as a whole as well as the increasing desire to work for remuneration. It is worth spending time considering the underlying motivation for voluntary activity in a post millennium context, especially in light of the increasing government enthusiasm to support the voluntary sector. Of course there will always be volunteers gathering together around interests (sport, dog training, steam railways, etc), with the incentive being enthusiasm for the interest, but other volunteer groups provide core health and social care. We suggest that if the government desires committed volunteers in these sectors, then the volunteer needs to have some kind of incentive; allowed time off employment for instance, or tax free low level payments for those on benefits. There is an underlying suspicion that volunteering is seen as a way of core service delivery at little extra cost to government. It is worth investigating where our next generation of volunteers will come from and what their motivation may be.

Our last words come from an interview respondent:

"[I am] very encouraged even to have been phoned - glad to hear there is a database with churches on it. A central body would be helpful [and the] need is great; glad you are in existence." (D107DF)