

CHURCHES HELP GOVERNMENT TO HELP LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Why has the Home Office been consulting the churches?

As part of its wide-ranging review of how the Government can best support and enable the voluntary and community sector (VCS) the Home Office recently produced proposals for how it could help communities at a neighbourhood level to build up their capacity.

What is Capacity Building?

The 'Community Capacity Building Review' (CCBR), as it is known, first of all sets out some definitions, and describes Capacity Building as:

“Activities, resources and support that strengthen the skills and abilities of people and community groups to take effective action and leading roles in the development of their communities.”

What is Community Development?

Government has also proposed that a number of its departments adopt a recognised set of values and principles in their community development work and it quotes from the recently-revised National Occupational Standards in Community Development Work. These standards are used by many organisations and are also recognised by a number of church groups. As the United Reformed Church says, these values and principles are important to the churches because:

“The values of community development work are strongly related to the values we hold as Christians - they mark our ministries through ‘integrity, honesty, inclusiveness, recognising all people as valuable and equal as made in God’s image, love for one another as for ourselves, respect of dignity for others, the integrity of all creation and the interdependence of all creatures of the earth.”

How did the churches feed their views into Government?

In order to consult as widely as possible, the Home Office produced a review of its working group’s thoughts on capacity building, and a separate document setting out its proposals and some key questions on these.

On behalf of the churches, the Churches’ Community Work Alliance (CCWA) undertook to mobilise church groups to respond to these key questions and designed an area of its website that made the Home Office consultation document an interactive on-line version for the churches. With help from Faithworks, the Shaftesbury Society and Caritas, the on-line consultation was publicised and an interim report of the feedback received was presented at a one-day consultation event March 2004 in Birmingham which was organised by Faithworks.

What were Government’s proposals for community capacity building?

Although the full proposals are too detailed to give here, and can be viewed at www.ccwa.org.uk/ccwa/building_civic_renewal.htm, the following sections summarise them.

Overall, what did the churches make of the Home Office proposals?

By and large, the feedback was very positive – the churches thought that it was good that Government wants to empower and support the voluntary and community sector, and particularly to help the grass-roots community sector to become better skilled and more self-confident. Because the churches are rooted in core values and principles that emphasise everyone's essential worth and dignity it was seen as a good thing that the Government was being clearer about values and principles in its dealings with communities.

Did the churches have more specific feedback on the proposals?

Yes, very much so. In fact CCWA took on a part-time member of staff to collate the responses and write a report detailing them. Having said that, there is so much more that the churches could have done if more time and resources had been available and only a tiny fraction of the church sector was able to respond. This indicates that the churches themselves, at grass-roots level, need substantial help in building up their own capacity.

This is a summary of the churches' feedback:

Values and Definitions: are we all talking the same language?

The key values and definitions laid out in the CCBR report were, on the whole, well received. However, some of the language of community development may not be familiar to all the churches. It was also very clear from the feedback that many people were either unfamiliar or bewildered by some of the language used in the report.

Examples of inclusive neighbourhood structures

Churches are particularly well-placed to comment on inclusive neighbourhood structures, as they have 'kept faith' with local communities through good times and bad and are sometimes the only agency that has stayed in an area. Our respondents provided many examples of where this has proved to be particularly effective. Time and again our responses highlighted the need for long-term commitment (and investment) from agencies. It is also vital to have transparency in decision-making processes, and good accountability encourages confidence in policy initiatives. For local governance to be rejuvenated, disenchantment has to be decreased.

Capacity building – a note of caution

Although it is essential for capacity to be increased, it is only of genuine use if local organisations are listened to by regional and national bodies and structures.

The CCBR report went on to propose three possible ways of Government supporting community capacity building:

A - Neighbourhood action planning

This runs the risk of becoming yet another top-down process that ignores grassroots opinion. It is therefore crucial that the local context is always borne in mind and aimed at whatever community actually exists (i.e. defined by identity, locality and/or interest) rather than 'perceived' communities (often geographical only). Short-termism can similarly be a

problem and hence long-term action planning is required to foster a sense of security and confidence. The faith sector can play a very significant role in this and case studies were again provided for models of good practice.

B - Replication of tested approaches through one or more national agencies

'Community development' approaches by national organisations run the risk of ignoring local viewpoints. Having said that, our respondents felt that this could work well, and they indicated that the national organisations which they perceived would best address local concerns are faith-related organisations such as the Shaftesbury Society, Faithworks, Caritas or CCWA (to name a few).

C - Investment in key local 'anchor' organisations

It was with local 'anchor' organisations that the feedback from the churches had most affinity. Anchor organisations appear to provide a better mechanism for dealing more directly with local concerns. They already work with a longer-term commitment and so carry with them a degree of permanence. It is important to work with the bodies that already exist rather than rushing to create new ones as competition rather than co-operation within the voluntary and community sector will ensue if there are too many participants. Anchor organisations need to remain as inclusive and representative as possible. There is the danger that they may end up consisting of those groups who are better at mobilising and securing resources anyway. So perhaps 'Anchor Partnerships' would be more suitable for encouraging dialogue and participation.

Which option did the churches favour?

Most responses favoured a combination of B and C or elements of all three approaches to maximise the best practices within local communities. Where a combination approach was favoured, Option C tended to take precedence followed by B and then A.

The bottom line for the churches is that initiatives need to come from and be driven by local communities, and that any option (or combination) which addresses this will be welcomed by the churches and the faith sector as a whole. Indeed, there was surprise that whilst Government was seeking to adopt the National Occupational Standards in Community Development Work, it had not included the key values of self-determination and reflective practice (for more details on these standards and their relevance to the churches, please visit http://www.ccwa.org.uk/ccwa/pdf/focus_spring_2003.pdf).

The faith sector plays a crucial role in providing stability to communities and by being a critical friend to Government. It is important that both Government and the faith sector recognise the significance of this role and build on the dialogue which has started.

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