



**Responding to financial pressures
and managing the impacts on the
communities we work with.**

February 4th 2011.

This report illustrates some of the impact of the current economic and policy climate on the voluntary and community sector in Camden. 18 groups and organisations took part in a seminar where they built case studies about their groups or organisations and the people they work with or support. The participants represented different aspects of the voluntary and community sector including small unfunded groups supporting tenants and residents or specific communities, small and medium sized enterprises, and larger charities and service providers.

The case study exercise focussed on three questions, each answered in relation to community / beneficiaries and group / organisation:

- **What is happening to you now?**
- **How are you managing this?**
- **How do you think things will look in the future?**

The resulting case studies were redistributed and participants were invited to comment on these – to find connections and common ground, and to suggest other ideas and solutions.

Findings from the seminar include:

- **A significant decline in levels of optimism and perceptions of new opportunity compared to that recorded in a September seminar on the Big Society policy agenda.**
- **Indications that increasing replacement of staff hours with volunteering cannot sustain organisations or services in the long term.**
- **Increasing levels of confusion and anxiety within communities.**
- **Increase in demand for services and support exacerbated by reduced capacity to respond and an increase in referrals between organisations as they struggle to cope.**

Messages from seminar include:

- **The voluntary and community sector needs clarity and reliable information from funders to be able to manage the situations that are arising and support their beneficiaries as effectively as they are able.**
- **The future for many local people looks bleak. The components that hold communities together are being dismantled. We are in danger of becoming a community with more entrenched problems with nowhere for people to turn for support.**
- **An alternative narrative is needed to oppose government policies that are dismantling state and civil society support to communities.**

Overview for communities and people VCS participants work with

What is happening to you now?

The most commonly expressed issue for communities is the confusion people are experiencing because of the pace of change. There is a lack of clarity about how government policy translates into reality. Participants describe their service users and beneficiaries as feeling insecure or 'in limbo'. People are aware of changes to welfare, service cuts and restructuring but often unclear about what this will mean to them. The resulting fear and anxiety is particularly acute amongst those who are already vulnerable – older people, the homeless, refugees and asylum seekers and low income families dependant on support and services.

Organisations and groups are reporting increases in redundancy, debt problems, housing issues and rough sleeping in their communities. Need for support is rising whilst the opportunities to access it are receding. Infrastructure organisations are also experiencing high demand for support. The demand is coming from organisations and groups that need to increase their capacity so that they can continue to deliver activities and services (and develop new initiatives) in response to community need.

Participants describe how vulnerable people are becoming more isolated. Older people are having less contact with other people as services are reduced or withdrawn. Tenants on low incomes are moving, or expecting to lose homes they will no longer be able to afford. Those supporting BMER communities describe greater barriers to integration and cohesion because of less opportunity for language, education and skills support. There is concern that important culturally sensitive services will be lost.

Many of the participants express concern about community safety. The impact of cuts to the police, increasing levels of youth unemployment and cuts to youth services.

How are you managing this?

Many vulnerable people are not seen to be managing. The anxiety and confusion being experienced is creating withdrawal, depression and isolation. Visible examples of people not coping include rough sleeping in a churchyard, the health and social impacts of reduced meals services for the elderly, people finding that staff in services they rely on are not there anymore, new and short term tenants displacing established communities.

Organisations and groups are working to keep people informed and encouraging their communities to work together, attend meetings, talk to councillors, and volunteer for local projects and services. Additional support is provided where possible but is usually short term. Increasing dependency on volunteers is not perceived to be a sustainable option for maintaining quality and consistency.

How do you think the future will look for the communities you work with?

The future vision for communities presented in the case studies is bleak. Particularly if all the changes proposed by Government get through Parliament. Communities are expected to become more fragmented, in parallel with more fragmented support and service provision. A major concern is that the most vulnerable people will not be seen or heard, they will become increasingly isolated and hidden from the mainstream. A decline in knowledge about and the erosion of people's rights is envisaged generally. Increases in crime, fear, exploitation, individual and institutional prejudice, and lack of opportunity for education and training exacerbated by a depletion of skills within communities are also cited. Some participants expect to see marked demographic change, market rent for social housing, services for tenants a thing of the past, and service provision that won't reflect local needs, but will generate profit for shareholders.

Overview for organisations and groups

What is happening to you now?

Organisations and groups are also feeling threatened and confused, due to withdrawal of financial support, but also because of the uncertainty created by contradictory agendas. Lack of clear information is affecting people's ability to forward plan. The case studies all reflect similar resource issues. Public sector cuts, other funders with less money, loss of premises and related income, higher competition for what is available, trading competition, rent and DRR worries, and loss of staff and skills. At the same time all the participants are experiencing increasing demands on provision. There is increasing reliance on volunteers to keep things going, and on energy rather than other resources. But this is not seen as a long term solution.

How are you managing this?

The case studies show that fundraising, developing new activities, collaborations, restructuring, exploring other avenues for income generation, increased trading and micro enterprise development are all being pursued to deal with longer term survival. Forward and worst case planning is taking place where people are clearer about their future resources. In the short term organisations are relying on their reserves, making redundancies, cutting staff hours, down-sizing premises, running skeleton services, and relying heavily on volunteers. Time is also being put into lobbying and campaigning at local and national levels, and dealing with staff and community stress and morale.

What will your organisation or group look like in the future?

Participants views on the future paint a picture of a still there but heavily pressured and struggling voluntary and community sector. Only one group doesn't expect to be around anymore, but others see a down-sized future where they can't meet impossibly high demands or get the organisational development support they need. A big worry is not being able to replace or compensate for the skills, services and community relationships that are being lost. Whilst volunteers are seen as a significant part of the future turnover is expected to be high leading to lack of consistency in services and activities. There are also concerns about having the capacity to cope with the work that increased volunteering will create. Campaigns and community action figure in the future, but potentially weakened by lack of opportunity for people to meet and socialise. The implied voluntary and community sector landscape consists of large service providers and scattered small unfunded groups without access to support to develop their groups and activities.

Overview of the comment and suggestion session

What's happening to you now?

Participants' comments on different case studies reflect a desire for collective action. To improve the flow of information, and to counter negative effects of cuts and changes. A combined civil society and public sector focus on countering fragmentation of communities and services. Enabling people to work together, organising forums and keeping people informed. Most participants report that people are demanding more and more information. The need to develop an alternative narrative, or approach to deficit reduction, is also cited. See below.

How are you managing?

Suggestions about managing impact on organisations and communities centre on publicising the impacts of current government policy on people and communities. Campaigning for a different policy approach with a unified local voice – a Camden message to the government. Other comment and suggestions on managing impact show agreement that ever increasing reliance on volunteers is not a sustainable solution for maintaining services. Organisations and groups are also referring their clients and beneficiaries to other equally stretched services as demand increases.

The future

The comments on the future of the voluntary and community sector suggest heightened levels of lobbying to ensure that funders recognise the importance of infrastructure and support needs, and equalities issues. The green agenda is suggested as a vehicle to focus long term needs. There is also some optimism that the voluntary and community sector can show resilience and meet community needs in difficult times. However in relation to communities resources will be scarcer and subject to more

competition. Reduced public sector staff, premises and other resources are cited in conjunction with fewer community groups as factors leading to greater isolation for the most vulnerable.

The following types of group and organisation took part in the case study exercise:

Children and young people's activities and services x 1
Health or social care service x 3
Faith group x 1
BAME community support group x 2
VCS infrastructure organisation x 2
Information, advice and guidance for residents / communities x 2
Tenants and residents group x 3
Community Centre x 2
City Farm x 1
Women's group x 1