

## **ChangeUp - Slough**

### **Semi-Structured Interviews with Chief Executives of VCOs**

#### **Background**

SCVS staff interviewed 17 senior managers of Slough VCOs and smaller groups to explore their experience and views on how the six major ChangeUp issues affected them, and where there might be identifiable problems or opportunities.

Each interview lasted for approximately 60+ minutes, recorded on Philips digital Voicetracers and later professionally transcribed. Respondents were assured that information provided in this way would remain Confidential, so key findings and verbatim quoted do not indicate source.

A typical cross section of 8 respondents -

**1.** Well established group – come across as being proactive in terms of servicing agreements and understand the need for sustainability and are addressing this through earning income. Can see the gaps/overlaps in system.

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**2.** Also a well established, accredited and planned organisation, identifies gaps from funding through to training, understand the need to delivery services on a longer term basis. Rely mainly on funds through the Big Lottery. Good support from the trustees and MC.

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**3.** Organisation has a strategic vision and avoid traditional streams of funding as see it as a hindrance to development rather than a help. Place importance on paid staff and providing incentives for retention.

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**4.** An established group working in Slough. The group is supported by its parent organisation, the Asian Health Agency. The interviewee expressed concerns around the statutory services ability to understand the needs of the voluntary sector, in terms of provision for the Asian Community.

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**5.** A small group, with a vision but without a clear strategy of how to fulfil it. Playing catch up in terms of funding for projects. Conflict within their board of trustees adds to the general feeling of crisis.

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**6.** A medium sized well established organisation. It has a strategy but is in danger of "mission drift"

Places importance on the role of it's volunteers

The organisation spends a good deal of time searching for funding to continue it's various complementary projects.

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**7.** Small, established grass roots organisation. Organisation's direction is direct response to the local people's needs- as they raise needs at forums. In danger of becoming reliant on one or two people. Uses council services but remains independent. Funds itself through an annual event.

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**8.** A small fairly new organisation. Run by the founder with the help of a small number of volunteers. The group is self-financing. Lack of funding is limiting the organisations ability to grow.

### **Recruiting & Developing Volunteers**

The recurring themes of these interviews covered three main issues -

- Volunteer 'slippage' the ongoing problem of retaining initially well motivated or lately trained volunteers who often became distracted or de-motivated by the demands of the volunteering role, or more pressing commitments in their personal lives.
- Ensuring a correct 'fit' of volunteer to a culturally diverse context, typical examples being language or gender obstacles to the ideal matching of skills to volunteer role.
- Flexibility necessary to continuously adjust and available (or potential / trainable) volunteer skills to identified needs.

Verbatim examples -

"When we started out we were very focused of service users and just trying to help as best as we can, but what we are finding that they are ----- volunteer ----- sometimes you have service users getting really high quality service, and when the volunteers disappear, for whatever reason, they get a job, changes of life, circumstances the service level drops rapidly, to the extent that service users are beginning to doubt if we are really genuine professional"

"I would say the potentials there and the opportunities are there but I think there is we say in the middle there is a real issue about matching and its to both parties, I mean the volunteer is being flexible about what they will do but its also organisations trying to be as ----- within their resources to accommodate"

"In terms of volunteers we have this huge problem I know lately you have got the volunteer sector but we actually have a huge problem in terms of volunteers and building a capacity of volunteers and we don't have enough we are really trying but again it's the same thing in a way we are in competition with other charities where people tend to go to the bigger charities"

"the other problem is we actually need volunteers who've got specific skills, who've got Asian languages, who might even have to be women a lot of the time so then we can place them anywhere where as if they are men we cant place them into a women's group and then we have to think about all the cultural restraints."

"word of mouth, befriending people, or using personal contact, personal friends to come and join you that's probably been the most successful.

(local Agencies?) We don't know any,

but than there is an issues about cultural sensitivity we need someone who can fit in -"

"very much push pull environment where they are pushing you for more information and you are pulling them for more activities, they want more from you but you are already overstretched by doing other things in the project and there is issues of capability, certain people who started the project will be getting, know what they want , know what they want to do and they get tied up with doing most of the things and then the time required to give them a friendly pat on the back to discuss things with people, to listen to their grievances or their difficulties sometimes is negative hence they feel undervalued and feel like they have not been given the opportunities to express their views and that can cause people to leave"

"very lucky to attract volunteers from the volunteer bureau and also from local schools but we need to have somebody in-house, because its quite difficult to even keep in touch with them to let them know what's going on and to make them feel that we really value what they do for us, a lot of people come along and want to know what we are doing and then either because we can't keep in touch with them or we can't maintain there interest they stop working with us"

## **Governance**

In one larger organisation Governance issues were considered to be productive and Trustees input and engagement very good. More generally however, there was a respectful value placed on Trustee's yet to be fully realised potential -

- The need for expertise in professional inputs especially financial due diligence and employment law.
- Patchy input and consistency of support from Trustees.
- The need wherever possible to rotate Trustees and Boards with fresh input, younger more expert management.

Verbatim examples -

"we have got a really good trustee board about 8 trustee's on their at the moment, quite a young team and quite involved, all of them"

"we do have a proper sort of business planning cycle in place but the I know that my MC are very pro kind of organic growth they will say what do we do really well and what are we not doing really well and keep that in the picture and then gradually the most needy gaps if you like identify those, research the need"

"I don't know what they've been doing, or what value they have but I know they come from very high calibre backgrounds so they do tend to have I don't think they'll need training"

"I can't actually answer what values they add, I am sure they adding immense value as we speak you know but regarding the actual project and how its - I don't know, that's a tricky one".

"areas of expertise like HR which are very useful, because thats when I call upon them when we are doing employment contracts and things like that, and I think any board should be looking to recruit people with particular expertise because it makes - so half and half, half of them are fantastic, half aren't"

"to be fair to the trustees that is not for a lack of them trying, they did put together 3 years strategy and - for each trustee member to organise or look into and it just didn't happen"

"Recruiting volunteers to work with the members is fairly easy, to get people to serve on the management committee is harder because we make it quite clear what there commitments is, it's a heavy commitment of time its not just a case of attending committee meetings and making decisions we expect each of our people to serve on the sub-committee to actually do some work"

"That's very important, I have had good governance training and I've got some good governance literature and I have made it absolutely clear to people who come to us that it is not an amateur we might be a voluntary organisation but we are not amateur, we are professional"

"so there is a major gap in capability and how to bring on new trustees is how you recycle trustees, how you bring on a, how you work with a trustee and the executive committee that's a big challenge.

What do you mean by personal liability -?"

"the younger ones would definitely find that managing in an institution that size is problematic but there are young people that have got those skills, are professional but then they would be deterred by the lack of the infrastructure - it's a catch 22, there are some people that would love to take the job, but they have got wrong intentions and they would damage the project"

"for me they are not significant, this sounds quite --- I would like them to be a lot more proactive, I would like them to take some of the responsibility for some of the things that need to be done, a bit like when you are in a commercial world"

"I would like them to be tangible, more proactive"

"I don't think I can comment on that at the moment"

## **Workforce Development**

Recurrent themes relate to proficient training and the concern that staff turnover can undermine investment made in people. There is also a sense that strongly motivated senior managers / chief executives tend to 'lead from the front' whereas a more modern team devolution management practice might be more effective overall. Typical issues relate to -

- Short term career prospects due to funding limitations
- Lack of Business ethos in staff development
- Employment Law competencies
- Overwork of staff and management

Verbatim examples -

"I have got a training officer who is responsible for all our ----- programmes of training whether they are - skills based. I have got another worker who lives in Maidenhead who is fully funded as a specialist drug worker, who does lead people in this service because that's a practical option, we might get some money for that, - and I have my office manager whose on the phone and basically at the end of every financial year I am left with a - that - somehow generate enough income to - myself (*too much hissing and echoing, can only make out easy words*) and I think that's the sort of complexity you find in most, in a lot of voluntary sector organisations"

"What we do at the moment is short term project for 1 year, 2 – 3 years and there are staff coming in and the moment they learn the job, after 6 months -----so from the time they come in, settle down, get to know the job, train them with little resources that we have, they are ready to leave again. When we are getting next funding ----- we don't know when we have to look for them but they are doing something else, find somebody else and start all over again"

"I guess those in the outside, why would anybody want to stake their career and future to a sector where a job at best is for 3 years at a time.....At the moment I fully agree, it is not an attractive place to work"

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"I don't know what the legal implications of that are, but we are sensitive to the fact that we don't want to do anything illegal, we try our best and keep within the law ---- the law, we try to ---- possibly with the young people trying to get them to through the CRB checks as possible and things like that."

"charities are expected to run more like businesses these days so its important that whoever is employed has business skills as well and that's very difficult combination to find someone who has business skills and the right people skills when it comes to recruitment of paid staff when we tried to recruit for West Berkshire it was incredibly difficult and very long and drawn out process but when it comes to volunteers we can be a little bit more flexible"

"in the voluntary sector you only employ people to do specific tasks and where as you really need somebody much more generally involved."

"I have worked with a good number of communities in other organisations and it doesn't matter whether you have got a strong committee, board, premises or whatever you do come down to one person all the time, who really is the driving force of the chairperson or whatever, don't you if you think about the organisations in the town its obvious its so often just one person really, paid or otherwise its one person"

## **Performance Improvement**

The main themes to emerge related to lack of investment and expert help, and the time poor relationship between addressing quality standards and delivering core services which are the working priority.

- Investment issues
- Need for expertise and professional help
- Attrition rates of people and knowledge painstakingly acquired

- Quality Standards versus Delivery goals

Verbatim examples -

"I think what we've been doing is investing in our work force but its in a way that it offers a real without putting gloom and doom on it we invested in our own"

"Its ----- and it makes you look at yourself critically and its ----- you get into cause I think with all of our organisation and you can easily the activity levels are very high you can just do activity and you still wouldn't be finished at the end of the day where as from ----- accreditations system specially the volunteering ----- delivery so do you accept ---- ----- plan it ---- ---- and give yourself that breathing space to -----"

"we don't have the time to go out and look for other areas of income and such as apply for grants we do the best that we can we don't have someone dedicated to do that and the council can not afford to pay for someone who can do that, we are in a bit of a no win situation really in that we support as many people as we can but we're almost on the balance of being swamped with too many people and not enough money"

"I think any small community group or big corporation needs that (**financial advice**). So it would be useful and it makes you look more professional as well."

**"Quality initiatives...**that's putting too much time into something that doesn't actually deliver services"

"going back to the one stop shop, I would like people within there who have the knowledge of voluntary organisations as far as accounting practices, charity account law, how to treat things, how to protect things"

## **Funding & Finance**

The issues here are about time and effort to raise funding, the planning limitations of short term funding and concerns that although management overhead is now applicable to many bids, the rationale is not always convincing to funders. There are misconceptions about statutory sector support and particularly about potential Procurement opportunities.

- Fixed cost / overhead funding
- Time diversion to detailed form filling and business planning proposals
- Inconsistencies in Statutory sector funding
- Larger VCOs confident with Contracts, smaller ones still bemused by the potential for Statutory sector Procurements

Verbatim examples -

"We have central costs if you read contract it says we should be able to charge in full recoverable set up and central costs, I mean it's a huge list which would be well under 10% of anybody's budget realistically almost ---- that you need, the reality is that if you put in bids that include even 10% people huff and puff and say what all that about and as an organisation we have only got reserves, well below what are a ----- financial advisors say we should have as a charity, so we cant dig into reserves"

"We can't just bring out of our pockets ----- so we have also got a business --- in the organisation now we are trying to get small bits of contracts that actually draw a degree of profit and that side operating as a business so first of all the people we employ have got to earn a salary and they have to try and contribute to the centre to give us a bit more, so, we are quite unique here"

"Trusts and other funders ..... they try to spread their money as far and as wide as possible, so they end up giving a little bit of business to small organisations and encouraging to ----- so called the grass roots small organisations which at best are not sustainable, so what they end up doing is giving money to small groups .... encouraging formation of non sustainable groups.....will have sometimes money for three months operation then they go to their communities and raise expectations and at the end of a few months funding dries up, they haven't got the skills to raise money to do strategy, to do financial planning to do forecasting to do what it needs to do to ensure it delivers services long term"

"We are always finding it quite hard to have core management because we have to somehow, the funds we have applied fro don't tend to look at that in that respect, it will cover partially, it will cover overheads, it will cover rent, it will cover sessional workers, it won't cover how to manage sessional workers, another layer of management"

"A classic thing to do with charities in that when they reach a certain point. We are not big enough to access core sustainability, funding. Yes we are not small enough that we don't have a number of core activities going on"

"but we have got to live in the real world a little bit, we know that most funding invest is three years isn't it so I think what we are trying to attune ourselves to is making sure that our planning cycle are about a year ahead of our funding cycles"

"major problems for us is we would like 3 year funding we just receive year from year basis which means we can only really plan a year ahead and that's made life very difficult"

"(Tendering) the council or the Primary Care Trust ---- with the charity which gives them handouts each year and they don't see us as being business people, you know plans and ideas and sometimes it does feel like that

(New Building / Resource Centre) Yeah, definitely, businesses have it so why can't we"

"you have to do a lot of the running, as someone who is doing more than a full time job, most volunteers are working during the day, to go and access this information and find it and work it out and be able to fill in huge forms is very time consuming and fairly demoralising when you get a rejection"

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"I think a lot of organisations in the voluntary sector would benefit from a person whose job it was to not just give help but to do, we could provide the information and somebody would do it. I want to tell you what I need and how much it costs, I want you to work it out and fill in the forms for me, I haven't got the time, yes I could use the money but in lots of instances things that I am doing could be better if I had the time to fill in the application form, I don't. I wouldn't mind contributing to a pot to pay for that service"

"I don't think it is really, we do small fund raising things, but social enterprise – no, I don't think it fits in with what we actually do"

"What about these funding loans that you can get, what are they called – Futurebuilders?"

I have never heard of them,"

## **ITC**

ICT issues acknowledge the reliance on computer systems, with a sense that equipment is often older and provided at low / no cost to VCOs. There is also some residual 'resistance' to IT and the need to get better control of technology. Key issues include

- Need for staff Training
- Little indication of sophisticated strategic use of IT
- Acknowledgment that control of the technology is an issue
- Acknowledgment (in most cases) that organisations cannot run without ITC.

Verbatim examples -

"OK, IT is critical for our organisation, we started mainly ---- all --- (too much hiss) our services in Slough, ----- if you like marketing would be on

the internet and we also offer on-line support so most things are on-line so its absolutely critical for us and its also critical for the long term effectiveness we have some --- IT projects going well at the moment .....we develop it to use the new technology, how do we get it, well we have to go for free software or share work or volunteers and not paying people to do it so the time to implement is a lot longer because we can't afford to pay people, is it affordable? Well we have a network which was expensive to set up, we can't afford a server, we can't afford some programme that would actually help us develop it faster unless we go for specific funding but that's something we are going to.."

"In an ideal world what would be the best system?"

Ok, I will get technical, a large server running a large database, which would integrate the website and all our other kind of services through it,"

"some of the members have got their own computers they know what they want and ----- fast speeds and they want all this and the other some of the members are new, so they are just learning basic skills of computing and we would be sending them on training and stuff but some of them don't even know how to connect to the internet"

"we have got IT, I personally don't use it to its best advantage but there are people in my organisation who do, of course we use computers for the normal things like letters and notices and things like that but I am not sure that I am really terribly in --- with things like email, I used to be but I think there's a lot of email overload at this present time and people are not replying to emails and I think sometimes they are just scamming over them quite quickly but I have been --- to myself sometimes where you find you have got 27 you look at them very scantily"

"I think ICT is extremely important but also because we are a learning organisation that are offering learning so its really important that, that develops as well"

"I think a charity this size, the security of data is key issue and storage, there doesn't seem to be any"

"Its really important, extremely, we couldn't manage otherwise"

"Well we would panic, ok that's a start, we don't have anyone with IT knowledge and I wouldn't know where to find someone who has got that knowledge and could help out, other than ringing up the company that supplied us the PCs"

"Currently it plays a significant role but we are heavily hindered by the lack of resources and heavily hindered, restricted by peoples ability to not use it so its ----- what I am trying to say is that we want to use it more, we need it more, we desperately seeking databases, software, hardware, we can't afford it"

"I don't know what we would do without it actually"

"its become apparent as we have grown we really need to be able to pay for your IT support because there is nothing worse than needing --- something done but to rely on somebody who will do it when they can, you have to be in control of it"

"I think there is an assumption that everybody has got access to this [ICT], if you come to the meetings and you look at the people you know perfectly well that most people have not got access to that, so you are evidence, you can look at people and think no, that's maybe wrong to think that but I am sure I am right and a lot of people wouldn't use it, wouldn't want to be part of the bigger information technology set up, because - interested"

"IT is critical for our organisation"

### **Other Issues**

Some contextual Verbatim indicating a range extraneous issues not covered within the ChangeUp remit -

"I don't think that is specific to the BME communities but its very, when people become vulnerable they tend to become quite isolated away from what's out there for them"

"problem is trying to convince council on how things work (phones are ringing in the background) there tends to be a lot of lip service they sort of, you have various calls and you have meetings but when anything needs to be solved the solution is usually from the statutory point of view".

"I think the problem is there are a lot of barriers in to entering the voluntary sector believe it or not, the people in private industry or in any job where they are not a teacher or social worker tend to think they have to go through a lot of qualifications to translate their skills and quite honestly there would be quite happy to get out of the private industry and move this way the only unattractive thing maybe is the salary because they are hugely different"

"what I find is in the voluntary sector is that its supposed not to be a ----- environment because you are friendly and eating cakes but its actually quite competitive on another level. And that level is not very constructive".

"Where we could come, we could meet ---- where they could do their workshops, they could leave their stuff there because I have a lot of things stored at my house"

"I think anything that benefits you, you've got to work at nothing comes free although it looks free; there is no such thing as free. Time has a value, there is a time implication."

RE: need for meeting spaces –

"Yes, it's not the big ones its smaller places [that is a problem] where half a dozen of you could meet, neutral places a lot of people surprise me that they don't allow not letting strangers in ----- into your house for a meeting."

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