

EACVS Modernisation Pilots Centres of Excellence: Communications

Assessing current methods of communication and scope for collaborative working



Working on behalf of Essex Association of Councils for Voluntary Service (EACVS)
Project lead by **Chelmsford Council for Voluntary Service**

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Introduction

Communications are vital to delivering effective voluntary sector support, and how information is gathered and disseminated can take a variety of forms. The purpose of this report is to present findings from a survey of fourteen CVSs across Essex, Southend and Thurrock examining current communications. This report will:

- define the parameters of information and intelligence provision across Essex
- review the information requirements of a diverse cross section of FLOs and other stakeholders
- develop an options analysis
- benchmark the current landscape regarding newsletters and other communication media such as other paper information items, e-bulletins and websites.
- make recommendations for
 - how to trial a high quality, information service to enable efficient communications across Essex, Southend and Thurrock
 - implementing a full communications centre of excellence (including suggestions for monitoring and evaluation to measure the quality and impact of the service).

Executive Summary

This report summarises the findings of research examining the communications provided by Council's for Voluntary Service (CVS) in Essex. The purpose of the research was to establish a view of existing communications, whether these are fit for purpose, areas of duplication and potential for collaborating. The research utilised two methods of data capture, a questionnaire with CVS directors and a focus group/interviews with a group of Front Line Organisations (FLOs).

It was established that:

1. CVSs mostly provide quarterly newsletters which are printed and posted to members. The newsletters are grounded in the locality, a feature which is appreciated by the FLOs who receive them.
2. E-bulletins are not provided by all CVSs, however the majority of FLOs like how these enable them to scan for information quickly. It was also suggested that e-bulletins are easier to share within an organisation.
3. Websites generally need improving in terms of impact and content.

Alongside the research, benchmarking was used to inform a number of recommendations:

1. Develop an Essex wide communications strategy or action plan.
2. Establish a centre of excellence for communications to lead on the strategy and drive improvements.

3. Retain local newsletters.
4. Explore the logistics of creating a single e-bulletin for Essex wide and national information.
5. Explore the options for a central web presence for all Essex CVSs.

Background

Capacity Builders have recently funded a number of research projects with the view of creating 'centres of excellence' across Essex in a number of fields. The purpose of these is two fold:

1. Drive improvements by creating single or multiple cells which spread best practice and provide a one stop shop for other CVS organisations.
2. Engage CVS organisations in a modernisation agenda.

A centre of excellence in training for the voluntary and community sector already exists in Essex and has been formed over a number of years by CVSs working in formal partnership. Initiated in 1999 with a Lottery grant, Voluntary Sector Training is an independent charity, formed as a partnership with infrastructure organisations, which has expanded from providing accessible training to the third sector in Uttlesford and now delivers training across Essex.

A range of community accountancy scoping projects have been developed across Essex:

- In West Essex, in collaboration with Rainbow Services, a survey was issued to establish the level of existing services.
- Simultaneously in Colchester, a project exists which offers a range of financial services to provide support and advice to the voluntary sector including payroll, training, independent examinations, bookkeeping services and an accountancy newsletter. Colchester and Chelmsford CVS are now working collaboratively to market this service to FLOs working in both districts.
- A centre of excellence research project, examining the provision of community accounts services across Essex, is amalgamating the work in this area and will report a number of options for trailing a service across the county.

Another centre of excellence research project, occurring concurrently with this project, is investigating funding and development. The project will map provision of funding advice and services across the CVS network in Essex and incorporate the findings of a recent survey of funding advice and gaps in service provision carried out by Big Lottery.

In relation to this project, a Task and Finish Group was formed to complete a review of communications, with regular reporting lines back to the Essex Association of Councils for Voluntary Service (EACVS) and the Essex, Southend and Thurrock Infrastructure Consortium (ESTIC).

Chelmsford CVS took the lead on the Task and Finish Group. The terms of reference for the group, as outlined in the introduction, provide the framework for this report.

Strategic Context

A framework of organisations supports Front Line Organisations (FLOs) working in the third sector in Essex. These organisations are often referred to as infrastructure organisations; generalist and specialist.

CVS (Council for Voluntary Service)

CVSs are **local support and development organisations**, sometimes known as local infrastructure organisations. Each works behind the scenes in their locality to ensure that local third sector groups and organisations get the support they need. They provide their members with a range of services and development support, and are the voice of the local third sector. Local infrastructure organisations help the local third sector in a variety of ways by:

- identifying and filling the gaps
- raising standards
- enabling communication and collaboration
- providing a voice
- promoting strategic involvement

EACVS (Essex Association of Councils for Voluntary Service)

EACVS is an Association of the district based local generalist infrastructure organisations (LIOs), sometimes referred to as CVSs or Voluntary Action, working to provide support and services to front line voluntary and community organisations across Essex. Each member of EACVS is part of a national association for voluntary and community action (NAVCA) that is in touch with over 164,000 local third sector groups and organisations across the country. For more information about LIOs visit: <http://www.navca.org.uk/about/whatisanlio.htm>

ESTIC (Essex, Southend and Thurrock Infrastructure Consortium)

ESTIC was formed in 2004 to meet requirements under the ChangeUp agenda, a Government strategy for building capacity in the third sector. The strategy required the establishment of a consortium in each county, bringing together all infrastructure organisations with the goal of improving the provision of support to front line organisations. There are approximately 40 members involved in [ESTIC](#), including [Rainbow Services](#) and 13 [Councils for Voluntary Services](#), the [Volunteer Centres](#), [Essex Council for Voluntary Youth Services](#), [Rural Community Council of Essex](#), [Essex Racial Equality Council](#), [Age Concern Essex](#), [Voluntary Sector Training](#) and the [Essex Community Foundation](#) amongst others.

ESTIC does not deliver services to FLOs but does host an online voluntary and community sector database and a website with links to all members of the consortium.

Operational Context

The parameters of information and intelligence provision across EACVS members can be characterised as a complex process of gathering and disseminating information. Information is not just gathered from voluntary and community sector sources but from any area that can enhance the sectors intelligence, for example updates from private law firms. The current model of communication can be summarised as follows:

Input - information sources

There are four levels or sources from which information is gathered:

1. National - organisations such as NAVCA and Big Lottery as well as national charities such as the NSPCC and Soil Association. Can also be non voluntary sector sources such as Management Today.
2. Regional - organisations that work across the East of England such as COVER- the community and voluntary forum for the East of England, and MENTER who run a network for BME voluntary and community organisations.
3. Countywide - organisations that work across Essex such as ESTIC or Age Concern Essex. They could also be organisations that are coterminous such as the PCT, Police authorities and Mid Essex Alzheimer's Society.
4. Local - organisations that only operate within one district.

Processing information

Generally information will not arrive in the form in which it is disseminated. It is usually processed into a format and form that is appropriate for the end user. Care is taken to 'translating' sometimes complex information into a format that is accessible for the end user.

Output

CVSs and others providing generalist local infrastructure support communicate with a variety of different organisations. Some of these organisations are local, some cross one or more CVS boundary and some are Essex wide. These organisations are both providers and receivers of information. Information is generally only disseminated on a countywide and local basis, and in some instances on a national scale.

These organisations can be grouped under four broad headings:

1. Front Line Organisations or FLOs - the bulk of the CVS member base.
2. Statutory bodies represented under the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) such as the local council, Essex County Council, NHS, Police, Fire.
3. Those organisations funding one or more CVS, who are also likely to be represented on LSPs (local and county-wide).

4. Other Organisations - these are local businesses and other organisations that may have an interest in the locality such as the local college or university, doctor's surgery or church.

The output of information from a CVS can take on a number of forms, these include:

1. Newsletters - usually printed and posted but sometimes emailed and posted on the website.
2. Email bulletins.
3. Printed information sheets.
4. Websites.
5. Library service.
6. Briefings and updates about specific or complex topics.

Methodology

A questionnaire was designed to examine further the current model and the parameters of information and intelligence provision across EACVS members. The questionnaire was emailed to members who were also asked to respond via email. The questionnaire examined the input, processing and output of information. It also included a number of questions to establish the appetite for collaboration on an Essex wide newsletter and website. **Furthermore, it explored how CVSs establish that they are providing information that is rooted in the local FLOs needs.**

In addition to the questionnaire, a review of the information requirements of a diverse cross section of FLOs and other stakeholders was explored through a focus group and telephone interviews. A number of FLOs were selected at random from a database of organisations with shared CVS records i.e. they are members of more than one CVS or are Essexwide. The organisations who took part are listed in appendix 2.

Four organisations attended a group session, whilst one organisation attended earlier in the day to provide feedback. A diverse range of printed information was provided for participants to consider.

Four organisations were interviewed by telephone.

All questions were designed to be open ended, with the focus group and interviews facilitated by Katherine Eglington.

Summary of Findings - Questionnaire

The questionnaire was emailed to 14 CVS directors and 12 responses were received. The results are listed in Appendix 1 along with a copy of the questionnaire. The findings can be summarised as follows:

Newsletters

100% of respondents produced a newsletter, mostly **quarterly**, with one CVS producing a newsletter monthly.

All newsletters are produced **in house** and are **mostly printed and posted**, although several CVSs also email and document their newsletter on their website as a PDF. In one instance a volunteer helps compile the newsletter and in two cases volunteers also help distribute. All respondents send their newsletter to at least their FLO members, with the majority also circulating to funders and other organisations such as schools and libraries. In the main, those compiling information for the newsletter have a **wider role** within the CVS.

Circulation figures vary from **150 to 1000** in each district.

The information covered in the newsletter varies between localities. For half the respondents information is weighted locally and for a number of CVS information is split 50/50. However, one CVS has only one third of their newsletter dedicated to local information. Information is gathered from a range of sources including local websites, regional/national websites, local publications, information from FLOs and LIOs, information from local organisations and information from regional and national organisations. Some CVS commission voluntary and statutory organisations to write unique articles that they know will be of interest to their local sector.

All respondents have **consulted** with their members regarding the newsletter, and in all cases this consultation demonstrated a **positive response** to the information.

Producing a newsletter is part of every respondents SLA with funders.

Other communications

Respondents said that as well as a newsletter they provide **printed information sheets, web postings and email bulletins** as well as **ad hoc information emails**. Whether a CVS sends regular email bulletin varies massively across the county from none at all to 100%. One CVS also stated that 58% of FLOs in their locality do not have email.

The majority of FLO contacts are **local** and the number of cross boundary and Essex wide contacts varies greatly across localities.

Only one of the respondents is **utilising social networking** to communicate with members. The barriers cited include **lack of knowledge and internet access by FLOs, lack of specialist knowledge within the CVS and lack of resources within the CVS to monitor**.

The majority of respondents suggested their websites have **'scope for improvement'** and felt that more time and input would help them make improvements. Suggestions included a low cost web building service and access to a central resource. Only three respondents felt that their website was adequate for local needs.

All those surveyed believed that there is some **duplication across Essex**. Suggestions to reduce this included producing core national/county information that could be cut and pasted into local publications, and centralising within one CVS with boundaries agreed at EACVS. In some localities such as Epping and Harlow, they produce a joint newsletter to try and reduce duplication across the two localities.

All respondents agreed that they **would be interested in collaboration** on a shared newsletter for countywide, regional and national information, and only one respondent said that they did not want to collaborate on a shared website. One questionnaire mentioned utilising the ESTIC website for this purpose and another cited www.thirdsectorcumbria.org.uk as a good example. The benefits of this

collaboration were highlighted as cutting down on staff time and freeing staff up for other work. The majority of respondents also believed that there would be benefits for FLOS in collaboration such as providing a better range of information and providing a more efficient service. However, as one respondent commented, there needs to be a **consideration of the infrastructure to enable collaboration**.

Four respondents stated that their CVS has a communications strategy.

Summary of Findings - Focus Group and Interviews

1. Representatives were first asked to think about the communications they receive and discuss the quality, frequency and type of information. The responses are summarised as follows:

In relation to newsletters:

- It was felt that printed quarterly newsletters are **well presented** and are routinely distributed within organisations. Some organisations photocopy and highlight articles relevant to different members of staff. Emailing these would mean they get printed anyway.
- All representatives agreed that although information is relevant sometimes the newsletter is received after the deadlines for things such as funding.
- One participant wanted to highlight the *'extremely good service'* they receive from the CVSs they belong to.

In relation to e-bulletins:

- A number of representatives, although not all, found **e-bulletins better met their needs** compared to printed newsletters and information sheets. E-bulletins were cited as more convenient and easier to scan for information. It was felt that the format of these bulletins (headings and short summaries) allows information to be scanned for relevance quickly. E-bulletins could also be accessed when away from the office, whereas posted information can be overlooked if working remotely.
- A couple of representatives agreed that it is easier to share information with staff when it is emailed/online. Quarterly newsletters are visually pleasing but not very easy to share across an organisation.
- In the last 5 years the use of email/internet has increased in the sector, one participant suggested that *'people are more streetwise'*.
- It was generally agreed by participants that printed newsletters and e-bulletins are *'two different beasts'* and all agreed that they both had their place.

In relation to websites:

- A number of representatives **do not use websites** suggesting that they do not have enough time or self motivation. One representative suggested they

- should be viewing the ESTIC website more regularly but found it difficult to use.
- When asked how organisations found out about CVSs a number of participants suggested that it was by word of mouth or proximity of their organisation to the CVS. Some representatives were not aware of the CVSs in areas other than where they are based/working. Generally it was felt that CVSs do not promote themselves enough.
2. Participants were asked to think about the number of CVSs they are members of, and whether they think they receive duplicate communications and/or information within these communications. Responses can be summarised as follows:
- Generally representatives **had not noticed duplicate information**, although a couple of participants had noticed duplication particularly in funding information but found this acted as a reminder regarding deadlines.
 - It was agreed that the information CVSs provide is **steeped in local communities**. Information is usually diverse enough that where there is duplication it can be overlooked.
 - One representative felt that CVSs **should be entrenched in their local area** and should therefore not have specialisms.
 - Participants wanted to see more **cross fertilisation of information across Essex** in order to make links and inspire.
3. Participants were asked how they would react if CVSs produced one e-bulletin or one newsletter insert containing just Essex wide and national information, retaining each CVSs local newsletter. They were asked to think about how this would benefit them. The responses are summarised as follows:
- Nearly all participants liked this idea, however it was agreed that it needed to be **carefully managed**.
 - One participant felt that it could raise expectations regarding the level of support or funding available.
 - Participants felt that they would benefit by being in touch with Essex wide information on training and networking.
4. Similarly, participants were asked how they would react if there was one CVS website for Essex wide and national information with links to each local CVS website. The responses are summarised as follows:
- Feelings regarding the idea of a single website were mixed and reflected whether participants currently use websites.
 - It was suggested that the **ESTIC website could be developed** for this purpose.

5. Participants were asked to think whether there are any additional ways CVSs could be communicating. The responses are summarised as follows:
 - It was suggested that **CVSs should not assume how people want to receive information** and maybe a menu of options should be provided so that organisations could pick and choose according to their needs.
 - Participants all agreed that they would like a yearly **Essex networking event** with stands for each CVS and break out areas for meeting others delivering a similar service to their organisation in Essex. Any event would need to be non political though.
 - One participant cited Special Interest Network Groups which are open forums adding value to areas of specialist work.

6. Participants were asked to give their views on social networking. The responses can be summarised as follows:
 - In general participants did not think organisations will engage with Facebook because it goes **against IT policy and confidentiality**. Although a number of national organisations are using it.
 - Only three participants saw the benefits in terms of modernising and engaging with young people through the communications mechanisms they use.
 - One participant would like to see a mechanism that allows questions to be posted and discussions facilitated a bit like a chat room. This works well on many organisations national websites.
 - The feeling was that at the moment there are **too many teething problems with social networking**, so it's better that other people test it out first.
 - Participants were not against using modern technology for blogs and hosted chats where information is structured and supervised.

7. Finally, participants were asked to think about how CVSs could support their members with the communications they provide. The responses are summarised as follows:
 - Some organisations have had help with website development.
 - A number of participants attend **third sector partnership groups** which act as the voice of the third sector in a locality, and feed into the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP). Participants like how there is two way communication in the areas where these exist. It was felt that CVSs have a mammoth task in representing the whole sector at the LSP and that these groups help galvanise opinion and aid the CVS in this task.
 - Some participants would like to see **more information and training regarding the Local Area Agreement and Essex Partnership**.

- A couple of participants would like to see links to their websites via the CVS websites.

All participants were given the option of raising any other points regarding communications. One participant highlighted the need for a single membership database, so that items such as renewals could be sent once to organisations that cover more than one CVS.

It was recognised that managing a CVS is a complex role to fulfil in terms of meeting the diverse needs of a wide range of organisations.

Four options have been identified and each appraised using a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis. A SWOT analysis is a subjective appraisal which is structured by the SWOT format into a rational list that helps understanding, presentation, discussion and decision-making. The four dimensions are a constructive extension of a basic list of pro's and con's.

Option1 - Retain current model of communications and make no changes

<p><u>Strengths</u></p> <p>Supports the core role of the CVS in providing local support and information.</p> <p>Supports the differences across localities and allows for local diversity.</p> <p>Supports the acquisition of knowledge by the staff who are compiling the information.</p>	<p><u>Weaknesses</u></p> <p>Information is duplicated across Essex. All Essex CVSs receive the same national/essexwide information which is then reproduced in a newsletter and other forms.</p> <p>Time consuming.</p> <p>Printing and posting is costly compared to email/website posting.</p>
<p><u>Opportunities</u></p> <p>Strengthen the local offer.</p> <p>Allows all FLOs, irrespective of the digital expertise/resources available to them, to access all news and information.</p>	<p><u>Threats</u></p> <p>Changes in information technology could leave CVSs behind other organisations.</p> <p>If changes are not made now and more IT based communications are developed, it could create a bigger and more daunting problem to solve.</p> <p>Sustainability - how long can this model of communications be sustained in an increasingly IT driven environment?</p>

Option 2 - Produce an Essex wide newsletter and website, making redundant the local newsletter and websites

<p><u>Strengths</u></p> <p>Eliminates duplication.</p> <p>Frees up staff time.</p>	<p><u>Weaknesses</u></p> <p>Weakens local offer.</p> <p>Staff would still need to process local information and send it to a central source to be compiled.</p>
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	Some FLOs would still require a paper copy.
<p><u>Opportunities</u></p> <p>If staff time is free they can focus on other areas of support/projects.</p>	<p><u>Threats</u></p> <p>Contradicts SLAs and could therefore affect funding.</p> <p>Funders may only support what a CVS does locally.</p> <p>Possible lack of political support.</p> <p>Could detract from CVS core role.</p> <p>Disengage FLOs.</p> <p>FLOs not online may miss information therefore creating the opposite effect of what CVSs want to achieve.</p>

Option 3 - Centre of excellence specialist bulletins

<p><u>Strengths</u></p> <p>There are existing specialist bulletins which could be used across Essex for example a community accountancy finance newsletter and funding bulletins produces a financial newsletter which could be used across Essex.</p> <p>Builds capacity in individual CVSs.</p> <p>CVSs can focus on other areas of work and signpost FLOs to the appropriate organisation and bulletin.</p> <p>Receiving a bulletin on a specific subject area means staff can filter information.</p>	<p><u>Weaknesses</u></p> <p>Knowledge development across a diverse range of subject matter (which is needed in any case for local CVS service delivery) is reduced.</p> <p>Could create more work for those CVSs that produce the bulletin.</p> <p>Boundaries could be blurred i.e. who communicates what and when.</p> <p>Restrictive i.e. information is received but not passed on as it is seen as someone else's job. FLOs get a poor service.</p>
<p><u>Opportunities</u></p>	<p><u>Threats</u></p>

<p>Opportunities exist for individual CVS to develop a particular area they are interested in or proficient at or are well resourced in.</p> <p>A paper alternative could still be provided?</p>	<p>CVSs that are not a centre of excellence could feel devalued.</p> <p>FLOs that are not on the internet could miss information, and therefore the service the CVS should be providing is undermined.</p> <p>Staff lose site of primary info which may impact on their continuous professional development e.g. funding specialists.</p>
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Option 4 - A shared website and newsletter and/or bulletins for countywide, regional and national information, retaining local newsletters.

<p><u>Strengths</u></p> <p>Retains local newsletters and knowledge.</p> <p>Reduces duplication of countywide, regional and national information across Essex. CVSs can focus on the locality.</p> <p>A half way house solution.</p> <p>May lead to cost savings as local newsletters become more compact and focused.</p>	<p><u>Weaknesses</u></p> <p>Questions regarding who will do this centrally? Who will fund it?</p> <p>Knowledge of primary countywide, regional and national information by local CVS staff may deteriorate.</p>
<p><u>Opportunities</u></p> <p>Opportunity for ESTIC to strengthen its website.</p> <p>Opportunity for EACVS to work collaboratively to enhance their own, and their members, visibility.</p> <p>Opportunity to establish an EACVS website.</p>	<p><u>Threats</u></p> <p>FLOs not on the interest may miss information.</p> <p>Cost may not reduce if CVSs print this as well as their own newsletter.</p>

Benchmarking

Benchmarking is the process of researching 'best practice' and comparing it with the current model or position. It is important that 'like for like' organisations are selected to benchmark otherwise it can become a disheartening exercise. For example, comparing CVSs to large national charities or local CVS to countrywide CVS.

Three CVS organisations were picked at random for the purpose of benchmarking; York, Ipswich and Reigate and Banstead. All of these organisations operate within a district in a wider county area.

York CVS

- Produce a newsletter ten times a year which is mostly printed and posted. The newsletter can also be downloaded through the website
- Very good website which is simple with an appropriate amount of information
- Website features media feeds for organisations to sign up to. Media feeds include news from the CVS, other VCOs, publications, podcasts and blogs

Ipswich CVS

- Produce a quarterly newsletter which is also downloadable on the website
- Website includes latest news and newsfeeds

Reigate and Banstead CVS

- Monthly newsletters which are printed and posted also downloadable on the website
- Website is very simple but contains a lot of information
- There is also a surrey wide CVS 'Surrey CVS Network' as well as 'Surrey Community Action'. Some CVSs in Surrey don't have websites so the information is confusing.

Comparison of Essex CVS websites

A desk top review of duplication across CVS websites was carried out by a Development Officer at Chelmsford CVS. It was established that there are some commonalities in the information provided on websites but this was not significant and the level and type of information provided varies. For example, only two websites featured information about partnerships and local compacts.

Benchmarking projects in Essex

A volunteer for Basildon, Billericay and Wickford CVS produced a report entitled, 'How does BBWCVS marketing literature compare to other CVS?'. Although the report focuses on branding it concluded that the majority of CVS organisations produce good newsletters however websites generally need more attention. One of the main reasons the report was produced was a feeling that the public could be better engaged through thoughtful branding and communications.

Volunteer Centres throughout Essex have worked collaboratively to provide a single website for volunteering opportunities. The website provides information about volunteering, a search facility for those looking for volunteering opportunities and a facility for organisations wanting to utilise volunteers. The project was funded by Changeup and has **established a single brand** for volunteering in Essex.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based upon the options analysis and benchmarking:

- 1. It is recommended that an Essex wide communications strategy or at very least an action plan is developed to drive improvements.**

This will demonstrate that CVSs are modern forward thinking organisations open to change. The research and benchmarking established that all CVSs provide a newsletter but some feature it as a download on their website and provide podcasts and newsfeeds. It also suggested that many CVS websites, not just those in Essex, need improvement in terms of impact and content. These are elements which could be addressed by a strategy and action plan.

- 2. Retain local newsletters (option 4) for local information.**

The focus group highlighted that they like the fact that each newsletter they receive is grounded in the local community. Local newsletters are **fundamental** to the role a CVS plays in the locality; they are part of SLA agreements and often reflect the locally perceived 'brand' of the CVS. The focus group and interviews also confirmed that FLOs like the 'local' feel of newsletters.

- 3. The option for a single email bulletin for Essexwide/National information**

There is evidence of a **level of duplication** although opinions on this varied between CVS directors who completed the survey and the FLOs who participated in the focus group. A number of FLOs found that duplication was actually useful in terms of reminding them of funding deadlines. Each CVS disseminates the same Essex/National information and for some members this information is received more than once. A single email bulletin with Essexwide/National information could be sent once to all CVSs and their members. The logistics of this need to be further explored.

- 4. The option of a central web presence for Essex CVSs**

A website is often the first impression someone gets of an organisation, and therefore a poor website could act as a barrier to engaging potential users. The benchmarking highlighted that many websites lack even basic information. The survey and focus group also indicated that websites needed to be improved. The option of a central web presence for Essex CVSs containing core information and links to locality websites could be explored using the lessons learned from established centres of excellence such as Voluntary Sector Training and the Volunteer Centres central website.

- 5. Consider creating a centre of excellence for communications to lead on a communications strategy and drive improvements.**

The initial task for this centre should be to increase the use and confidence of FLOs with information technology, and secondly increase capacity within CVSs to provide email bulletins and fit for purpose websites. The legalities of social networking could also be explored and a watchful eye kept on how modern technology is being used by the third sector. Consideration should be given to utilising existing resources such as the 'SKiLD' programme run by NAVCA <http://www.navca.org.uk/services/learningopps/skild/>.

The findings of this report pose a number of questions regarding the role and visibility of ESTIC. Why is the ESTIC website not acting as a central information point for Essex wide information? It is evident that a website should be developed as the single point of information regarding Essex and National information, whether ESTIC or another mechanism such as EACVS is used for this purpose is a matter for further debate.

Conclusion

Although websites could be improved and IT utilised more effectively, it is clear that the information CVSs provide to their members is **timely, appropriate and appreciated** by all that receive it.

Being 'local' is truly at the heart of what a CVS does. Taking this away would undermine the CVS and its role in each locality, ultimately impacting on front line organisations.

CVSs have a diverse membership base which has a range of preferences and requirements as to how information is received and accessed. It is important therefore that CVSs are responsive to local and member needs.

Opinion varies regarding the level of **duplication** and, without a thorough evaluation of information being provided month on month across Essex, this could not be quantified. However, efficiency in information provision could be addressed in a number of ways. The role and function of the ESTIC website needs to be clarified and a **centre of excellence for communications** created to drive improvements and spread best practice.

Appendix 1 - Survey Questions and Results

Number of respondents: 12 out of 14

1. *Do you produce a regular newsletter for members and stakeholders?*
YES:12
NO: 0
2. *If you do not produce a newsletter, what are your reasons?*
Non applicable
3. *What is the frequency of this newsletter?*
Weekly: 0
Every 2 weeks: 0
Monthly: 1
Quarterly: 10
Annually: 0
Other: 5 times a year
4. *How do you disseminate the newsletter? (multiple answers can be given)*
Printed and posted: 5
Email: 2
pdf attachment in an email: 2
A combination of the above: 6
Other (please specify): (1) also posted on website
5. *Who do you send the newsletter to? (multiple answers can be given)*
FLOs: 12
Funders: 9
others (please list): *libraries, doctors, dentists, churches, parish clerks
individuals who have requested a copy, statutory partners, schools, press,
local businesses, elected members*
6. *What is the total circulation figure?*
0 - 100: 1
101 - 200: 4
201 - 300: 1
301 - 400: 2
401-500: 2
501-600: 1
601 - 700: 0
701-800: 0
801 - 900: 0
901-1000: 1
7. *Who is involved in compiling and editing the newsletter? (multiple answers can be given)*
Paid member of CVS staff: 7
A volunteer: 1
Team effort (more than one staff/volunteer): 7
Outsourced to: 0
Other (please specify): *a joint effort with another CVS*

8. *Are these individuals solely involved in producing the newsletter or do they have other roles within CVS which would necessitate keeping up to date with a wide variety of information*

Just produce newsletter: 0
 Have a wider role: 12

9. *Who is involved in distributing the newsletter? (multiple answers can be given)*

Paid member of CVS staff: 4
 A volunteer: 3
 Team effort (more than one staff/volunteer): 8
 Outsourced to:
 Other (please specify): Time to time volunteers

10. *Roughly what percentage of the information contained in an average newsletter come from local, regional, national sources?*

Local	Regional/ national	
50%	50%	5
75%	25%	5
25%	75%	
33%	66%	1

Comments: *'slight tendency towards more local information'*
(1) no answer

11. *How is the information researched and collected for the newsletter? (multiple answers can be given)*

Local websites: 10
 Regional/national websites: 10
 Local publications: 12
 National publications: 10
 Information from FLOs: 9
 Information from other LIOs: 10
 Information from local organisations: 10
 Information from regional/national organisations: 10
 Other (please specify): *commission/invite articles from key statutory contacts and new members. Local topical enquires. 'We get a lot of information through by email from regional bodies, the Fit4Funding newsletter etc, which we retain for the next newsletter'*

12. *Do you consult with your members regarding your newsletter and or other forms of communication?*

Yes: 12
 No: 0

13. If 'yes', please summarise in a few words the majority response

'Excellent, looking forward to it, best source of info we receive'

'96% said it was useful, 60% said it was very useful'

'What they liked was - 85% funding and grant info, 60% news and info about other groups, 40% training news'

'Thankyou, keep it going, very informative, keep up the good work, think its really good, very interesting small newsletter'

'Happy with frequency and content of printed newsletter. Communications is much better using e-bulletins as these mean that relevant information is collated into one mailing and one email fortnightly. Easy to access and information is clear'.

'Always very positive about newsletter. Satisfaction surveys carried out each year regarding content'.

'The majority did read the articles and found it useful. We found members of the public were also picking up our newsletter so we now produce a more general newsletter regarding VCS and their services with a small amount of info such as funding and we produce a Members' Mailing which has more in depth articles relating to VCS'

'Our newsletter averages 20 pages but the majority were happy with receiving Update four times a year, and with the length of each issue. They were also happy with its different sections, although 18% of those who responded would like to see more information in the Funding News section, and 14% would like more information in the Legal Updates section. Where groups had a favourite section, the most popular was the Funding section, followed by Member News, and then Legal Updates and What's New came in joint third. 90% said that they pass on their copy of Update to others, demonstrating just how widely it circulates.

"It is a great source of information and a joy to receive"

"Update is a digest of what we need to know, and are unlikely to find out by other means."

"Really enjoyable read".

"The eyes and ears of the community. A very useful tool in networking."

'Send our newsletter only by email and our members are happy with this'.

'Keep up the good work'.

'Newsletter is very well received - praise for clear formatting, so groups can identify the items relevant to them, and that the information is targeted to be relevant to local groups'

'Very well received'

14. *Are you able to provide further information about this consultation*

Yes: 10

No: 2

15. *What format did this consultation take? (multiple answers can be given)*

Survey: 9

Focus group: 2

General invitation for comments: 4

Other (please specify): 0

16. *Is production of a newsletter part of your SLA with funders?*

Yes: 12

No: 0

17. *Do you receive any other income to support the cost of the newsletter?*

Yes: 4

No: 7

Other: (1) *'do not charge membership fee but ask for a donation of £10 pa towards our newsletter'*

'Newsletter is funded via core grants, external funding is secured to provide recorded copies for Talking Newspapers - Age Concern. Small donations received from Rotary club'

'Big Lottery Funding as part of the overall project funding for FAIR'

Section 2: Other communications

18. *What other forms of information do you provide to your members? (multiple answers can be given)*

Email bulletin: 11

Printed information sheets: 8

Posted ad-hoc information: 7

Website postings: 8

Other (please specify): email adhoc information (1), face-to-face information networks (1) briefing notes (1) printed funding newsletter (1) monthly funding bulletins (1)

19. *Roughly what proportion of your FLO contacts do you send regular email bulletins to?*

0-10%:2

11-20%:0

21-30%:0

31-40%:0

41-50%: 2

51-60%:0

61-70%:0

71-80%: 2

81-90%: 2

91-100%:3

(1) no answer

Other: '58% do not have email'

'Although we do send out/ forward on emails to specific groups (identified by the topic matter) we don't yet have the facility for mass emailing. We were hoping that the ESTIC database would allow this facility but we have not yet had the training to do this. In any case, we would want the information to be available to all and so far not all members have provided their email contact details'.

20. Roughly what percentage of your members are local, cross boundary (2 or more localities) or Essex wide?

Local	Cross boundary	Essex wide
89%	10%	1%
85%	8%	7%
80%	10%	10%
80%	15%	5%
80%	10%	10%
65%	15%	20%
61%	16%	23%
62%	5%	33%
50%	45%	5%
50%	40%	10%

(2) no answers

21. Do you communicate with your members via the any of the following social networking mechanisms?

Yes: 2

No: 9

(1) 'Facebook page is a work in progress'

'We use facebook and twitter'

22. What do you perceive are the primary constraints to utilising modern communication technology such as social networking? (multiple answers can be given)

Lack of resources to monitor: 6

Lack of interest/support from FLOs: 5

Lack of knowledge or Internet access by FLO: 4

Lack of specialist knowledge within CVS: 6

Other: 'lack of resources within the CVS to carry out the work'

'It hasn't been suggested by our members or stakeholders. Over 50% of the groups that we work with are small and their priority is set up and funding. Supporting our members with their priorities is our priority rather than doing something just for the sake of it'

'Need to update the website before consideration to other forms of media can be considered'

'We do!'

23. *Is your own website adequate for purpose?*

Yes: 3

Yes, but has scope for improvement: 6

No, but have plans/resources in place to update/improve: 3

No, and have no plans plans/resources in place to update/improve: 0

Don't have a website: 0

24. *What would help you to improve your website?*

'Time and input'

'We feel it is adequate for the local need as stands'

'Time'

'Professionally produced and updated'

'A low cost web-building support service that would help with the design but allow us to update ourselves. IT work with Estic began with the intention of allowing the Consortia to support member webpages but this has not yet been forthcoming'

'Access to a central resource to improve - currently all website improvements and updating are carried out and administered by a volunteer due to lack of funding to engage external resources/expertise'

'Access to IT specialism to build a new site. Currently we are happy with the site, but we do not have the facility to add additional pages for other information that we would like to get out through this medium. We would also like to be able to adjust the format of some pages of our existing website, but this is not possible with the current templates we work from'

25. *Do you think there is duplication in the information that CVSs communicate across*

Yes: 11

No: 0

Other: (1) don't know, a lot of our members are just local

26. *If 'yes', what do you think is the extent of that duplication?*

'Difficult to quantify, probably worse for Essex groups'

'Mostly all producing newsletters however, at Voluntary Action Epping Forest we produce a joint newsletter with Rainbow Services Harlow which prevents duplication into these two districts. It includes local sections for both districts and a generic section for Essex/National News'.

'On a higher level but not at a local level, if we didn't reproduce this information many smaller groups wouldn't get it'

'There will always be some duplication due to information being wider than the local context'

'I would think that Essex wide or multi district VCOs that are registered with more than one CVS probably get some Essex wide, Regional or National stuff more than once. However, I would hope that it was minimal as we try hard to target this news to suit our locality/membership'

'Will mainly be Essex Wide and National information i.e. policy, funding and volunteer related information'

'Regional and National information'

*'Fairly significant. Some information appears multiple newsletters, but this is not necessarily a problem because we pick these up from each other's mailings. Some information is sent to many CVS to distribute by statutory partners who want to get information out there'
'Possibly all of the regional and national info'*

And what do you think could be done to reduce it?

'The duplication problem is much larger when you take in all the statutory organisations. They ask us to disseminate and then you find they have already told the FLOs directly'

'Production of core/national/county information that could be cut and pasted into local publication'

'A centrally produced newsletter would reduce it but you would lose the local aspect of information'

'Having the facility to ask for email or mail cascade of urgent Essex wide, Regional or National from one central point'

'A basic bare bones publication distributed to each area containing National, Regional and Essex wide information, to be personalised with local news at each setting'

'One CVS to take the lead on disseminating this information'

'Not sure really - if organisations are members of multiple CVS, they are bound to receive some of the same information from multiple sources. I guess where this may start to grate with organisations is when they also receive direct from the information source or from other specialist infrastructure organisations. So maybe an approach is required wider than just the CVS network on how information is distributed to the voluntary sector'

'Local versions with a "pooled" insert re all of the other stuff'

27. **Would you be interested in collaborating with other CVSs on a shared website for county wide, regional and national information?**

Yes: 11

No: 1

Comments: *'thought that this is what ESTIC site was supposed to do?'*

Good examples?

www.thirdsectorcumbria.org.uk/

and especially these sorts of lovely inclusive pages:

http://www.thirdsectorcumbria.org.uk/support_cumbriacvs_resources_facilities.html

Poor examples?

www.estic.org.uk - *'nice looking/idea; some of the website content no longer meets the intended brief and duplicates other news source'*

28. **Would you be interested in collaborating with other CVSs on a shared newsletter and/or bulletins for county wide, regional and national information?**

Yes: 12

No : 0

Comments: *'Yes, with caution. But not sure how it will work though for local FLOs would need a hard copy insert for the newsletter'*

'We already share info by circulating newsletters'

'But would need to ensure that quality and relevance of information remains for our local groups - we are copied into other CVS newsletters and ebulletins, and at times it feels like some just forward on everything, regardless of its relevance, which can be very overwhelming for frontline groups!'

If 'yes' do you know any good examples of this?

'There is a lot of information that is generic for Essex but newsletters would still need to include local information for each district to prevent disengagement with our local membership'

'Big Issue and Essex Chronicle - I like the way these have national core news supplemented by sections and pages that are very locally targeted.'

Email bulletins that are only sent when there is something to say and which have two or three maximum 'calls to action' sentences with links to further information'

'Currently develop funding news with two local CVS organisations on a tri - monthly rota with each CVS adding their local information as appropriate'

Any poor examples?

'Anything that offers 2 in one. If we did that here, very local groups would receive half a newsletter etc.'

'Anything that sacrifices good content and a readable font for colour or A5 size. Anything which is in less than 12 pitch font to squeeze news in'

'Email 'bulletins' that are PDF documents - passing on the print costs'

'Email bulletins that need to be scrolled down and down and down...as they are so large'

29. *If 'no' what do you perceive as barriers to collaboration?*

'Although said 'yes' there are issues around pooling information, making information relevant to all organisations and distribution'

'Issues of ownership, territory, and accountability'

30. *Do you think there would be any cost benefits to collaboration?*

Yes: 8

No: 2

Comments: (1) *'Not sure - time saving could be overstated if we still have to filter for local relevance'*

'freeing up staff for other things'

'cut down on research time'

'Economy of scales would dictate that an Essex wide information Officer would be doing National and County work once and disseminating out to 12 areas instead of 12 individuals all duplicating the similar messages of news etc'

'However, I would see benefits in terms of CVSs with scarce resources being able to share in a newsletter produced by another, allowing that small CVS to concentrate on better delivery of other outcomes'
'Time saved, more verbal collaboration and developing partnerships across CVSs across the region'
'Less time spent by core staff on duplicated information'

31. *Do you think there would be benefits to FLOs in collaboration?*

Yes: 9

No: 2

No answer: 1

Comments: *'don't think the majority of FLOs are getting duplicates from CVS'*
'Before this is considered, the infrastructure collaboration on this issue needs to be in place'

'Possible better range of info'

'These Essex wide FLOS would only receive information once'

'Reducing duplication. With the caveat that any change will need to be consulted on with CVS member groups/local VCS'

'May provide more time to work with FLOs to develop articles and gather information if the bare bones of the newsletter were to be collated elsewhere on a rota basis'

'More efficient service, avoiding duplication'

'Raising quality of information distribution'

32. *Do you have a communications strategy/policy?*

Yes: 4

No: 7

Not sure: 1

Appendix 2 - CVSs who responded to the survey

Basildon, Billericay & Wickford CVS
Braintree District Voluntary Support Agency
Brentwood CVS
Castle Point Association of Voluntary Services
Chelmsford CVS
CVS Uttlesford
Colchester CVS
Maldon & District Community Voluntary Service
Rainbow Services Harlow
Rayleigh, Rochford & District Association for Voluntary Service
Tendring CVS
Voluntary Action Epping Forest

Appendix 3 - Focus Group and Interview Participants

Action for Family Carers
Age Concern Essex
Alzheimer's Society - Mid Essex Branch
Chelmsford Women's Aid
Essex County Football Association
Families in Focus
The Guinness Trust
Relate North Essex and East Herts
Stroke Club for Mid Essex

Appendix 4 - References

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