

“Good things come in small parcels”

I am not sure where this quote comes from so I will attribute it to my Mum (who was small), who used it every Christmas when someone (usually me) complained that they didn't have any big presents.

And you know what my Mum was obviously very wise!

The Glue that binds:

Every day here at CCVS (part of the Support Cambridgeshire Partnership) we work with groups that are doing amazing things, and many of those are doing that with very little funding and little or no paid staff time. In fact, this year 58% of those groups who responded to our annual survey had an income below £50,000 a year; 69% had 5 or less staff, and 35% had no staff.

These groups are at the core of what makes the communities in which we live 'good places to live'. These small groups bring people together. These small groups provide services to fellow community members. These small groups, unfortunately, replace underfunded statutory services.

If I look at the village where I live there are groups doing all these things and more. The archaeology society has brought people together through its programme of digging test pits across the village, its local talks and now its work with local schools.

The local Baptist Church runs a mother and baby/toddler group that allows parents to come together, make friends, and provides activities for the children.

The local infant school PTA raised over £20,000 to provide the children with new IT, exciting learning opportunities and additional resources.

Robert Putnam said that we were now bowling alone, the latest national survey shows that volunteer numbers have reduced and that people volunteer for shorter periods. But I wonder if the small groups working in communities and the volunteers they have simply fly so far beneath the radar that few, outside their communities, know they are there.

We know that some groups are struggling to get volunteers. We know that volunteering patterns are changing. We know that people work more hours for more years. Whilst these problems are real and groups need help recruiting and retaining volunteers and developing volunteering opportunities that fit with people's other commitments I am always astounded by what people do and what the groups and organisations they work for do.

Last weekend, I along with 12,405 other people across the UK volunteered at Parkrun and Junior Parkrun events; 116,928 people finished the events. People were connected, active, healthy, and doing something in and for their communities.

So, there you are, small community organisations and volunteer led groups are the glue that binds communities together; as well as the deliverer of untold numbers of services and activities.

The growing darkness:

National research has shown that it is the smaller organisations that have been most impacted by austerity measures and changes to how national and local government fund the sector.

We have seen grants from local authorities fall in real terms for several years, and there is a real postcode lottery as to the funding a group might get dependent on where it operates. Coupled to this we have seen changes to how and what the Big Lottery will fund, and the consolidation of many corporate grants programmes into the Cambridgeshire Community Foundation.

Linked to the downturn in funding availability is the upturn in demand. As local authority and health thresholds for statutory help increase, more people are left to seek help from voluntary groups. There has been a marked increase in the use of Food banks: Many organisations working with those with mental health issues are seeing clients with increasingly complex needs and their ability to refer on has reduced.

At the same time, there are growing pressures to get organisations of all size to meet different sets of regulations or rules. Changes in fundraising practice which came about following the failings of a number of big charities will have some knock-on effect on the small ones. Data protection will become an even bigger issue for all organisations regardless of their size. The charity commission is no longer there to support organisations but to regulate them. Whilst the impacts of all these changes may be less for smaller organisations their ability to know about them never mind implement them is a growing issue.

Organisations are run by volunteers in the form of trustees, and whilst calls to end charity as exemplified by a recent article in the Guardian¹ are misplaced and written as 'click bait', the expectations and pressures are growing. Many small organisations are governed by individuals who are passionate about the work or cause, very few trustees are passionate about governance.

Generally, trustees find themselves in the role after becoming a long term volunteer or by having been 'asked' by existing trustees in their acquaintance. It is essential that trustees are aware of all the different regulations, rules and laws that cover their work. From insurance requirements to financial management requirements and employment rights, the list is endless (or at least very long).

The light at the end of the tunnel:

Let's recap. We need small voluntary groups and charities for healthy local communities.

Healthy communities are better able to support, sustain and nurture individuals.

Small voluntary groups and charities are finding it harder to find the money they need to operate.

The trustees of the small voluntary groups and charities are being drowned under increasing regulation.

What these small groups, communities and individuals need is somewhere to turn to give them the skills, knowledge and confidence to deliver their services and stay sustainable. They also need someone who will champion their needs with statutory bodies and the wider public.

They need local infrastructure organisations like those in the Support Cambridgeshire partnership.

The Support Cambridgeshire annual survey shows the fact that organisations value their membership of both Cambridge CVS and Hunts Forum. They value the work we do to represent their needs and those of the wider sector and they appreciate the advice, support, training and

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/voluntary-sector-network/2017/aug/08/kids-company-is-charity-worth-saving>

communications. It is essential that this local service remains. Despite the wisdom of ages being available at the click of a *Google search*, many organisations want some help in identifying the best resources, or in transferring the information into knowledge. Groups want access to local, free training that it is pitched at the right level. They want to be able to contact someone who will answer their question on all aspects of running a voluntary group. They want help identifying and applying for relevant funding pots. They don't need consultants or long-term scrutiny; they don't need courses in London or online.

Local infrastructure may well have fallen out of favour with many funders and with national government. Local authorities may try and squeeze it by asking for more for less. But local organisations value the service. By investing in strong and sustainable local infrastructure you are investing in a diverse and sustainable local voluntary and community sector; and therefore, in strong, resilient communities.

Local infrastructure may not impact directly on individuals lives and wellbeing but it does ensure that there are more groups out there that can, and do.

"It is difficult to sum up the support from CCVS in a few words! It is, quite simply, vital for organisations like ours who are small and inexperienced in many areas and also who sometimes struggle with confidence on bigger issues. It is amazing to know that there is high-quality support for us, and also such frequent and detailed updates about funding and what is going on in the sector. Thank you for all you do for us and organisations like us"

The thoughts of Mark Freeman, Deputy CEO of Cambridge CVS, commenting on the results of the latest State of the Sector Survey for 2017.

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