

Croydon Voluntary Action

A Review of the Management Models of The Voluntary Action Centres



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CVA's Voluntary Action Centres – A Review

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Background

Croydon Voluntary Action

Croydon Borough Guild of Help was set up in 1908 and a century later its successor, Croydon Voluntary Action, continues to support and develop civic life in Croydon in its centenary year. Throughout its history, the organisation has responded to the needs and challenges of a growing and changing community.

This has included the management of buildings providing a base for different organisations, as well as the activities and management of the organisation itself. These have often been shared and or owned by other bodies and the current Voluntary Action Centres show a similar model.

Croydon Voluntary Action currently operates on six sites in the north of the London Borough of Croydon and will shortly be opening a new Healthy Croydon Resource Centre.

Over the last five years the organisation has almost doubled its turnover and has been successful in expanding its portfolio of work. It is recognised as a key umbrella organisation in Croydon and has the respect of both the voluntary and community sector across the borough and the various statutory sector partners. It has developed close working relationships with the statutory sector and was an integral partner in Croydon achieving its Beacon status for Increasing the VCS role in Service Delivery.

There are 40 permanent paid staff, 20 casual staff and a number of volunteers used across the organisation.

Croydon

Croydon is an outer London borough on the extreme southern edge of greater London. It has a population of 330,000 (2001 census) and this figure is rising by about 5% every ten years.

Currently it has a predominantly white population making up 70% of the population but it's location near to Gatwick airport and with good rail links to the channel terminus means it also has a growing ethnic minority with an increase in the number of refugee and asylum seekers.

64% of the population are in employment and this is slightly higher than the national average. It is largely a commuter area with good transport links to central London. In the past Croydon was an industrial area with metal works,

car manufacture and an important airport. It now primarily provides work in service industries, retail and administration, and the arts.

There is a vibrant third sector in Croydon made up of over 1000 voluntary and community groups and over 75% of the population belonging to one of the major religions.

Current operating environment

Over the last seven years there has been increasing interest in the voluntary sector by the Government. This began with the Cross Cutting Review into the role of the Voluntary and Community Sector in Service Delivery in 2002. This looked at Public Service delivery and while this is still high on the agenda with the commissioning of services from the third sector, there are many other initiatives that encourage local and national statutory sectors to work closer with the third sector.

A number of these are relevant to this piece of work when looking at the Voluntary Action centres.

In 2006 the interim findings of the Third Sector Review were published. This formed part of the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review and outlined the future role of the third sector in social and economic regeneration. Included in this was the announcement of £10million investment in community anchor organisations and community assets, as well as money to be given, through Capacitybuilders, to develop the third sector infrastructure and to continue to focus on the Compact.

The “Quirk Review – Making Assets Work” (2007) outlined a vision of revitalised communities and the part to be played by “optimising the community benefit of publicly owned assets”. The report put forward the benefits of a larger programme of asset transfer from the statutory sector to the third sector and gave examples of where this had been successful.

Later in 2007 the Office for the Third Sector announced the Community Assets Programme, with £30million to encourage the transfer of under used local authority assets to local organisations. The money was to be given out as grants via the Big Lottery Fund for the refurbishment of local authority buildings.

Finally in November 2007 the Department for Communities and Local Government published a consultation paper accompanying the Local Government and Public Involvement Health Act: Creating Strong, Safe and Prosperous Communities. This paper outlined the “Duty to Involve” local communities in shaping the future of their area via the Local Strategic Partnerships and Local Area Agreements. It also charged each authority with

the need to produce a Sustainable Community Strategy that gives the vision for the area.

The result of this legislation and other government action is that we are currently in a position where the statutory sector has a mandate to get to know and work with the third sector on common issues for the good of local people. Funding is in place to make this possible with a better developed infrastructure and areas of local need and a vision of the future is outlined and agreed between partners.

CVA is even more fortunate in that it has a forward looking local authority that is already delivering on many of these issues and the joint working and partnerships are already in place with both the local authority and PCT. The groundwork that is proving such a stumbling block in many London boroughs doesn't exist in Croydon and CVA is well positioned to reap the rewards of this.

Methodology

This piece of research has three main strands to it:

- ❖ Review and evaluate each of the existing Voluntary Action Centres
- ❖ Identify opportunities to extend expertise in centre management
- ❖ Options for future management of Voluntary Action Centres.

It was decided to use a form of research that combined field research with desk research.

Field Research

The field research took the form of structured interviews with key staff involved in the management and running of the Voluntary Action Centres. This included the centre managers, facilities maintenance operative, central finance, capacity building and administrative staff and a representative of the buildings landlords.

Interviews were designed to:

- ❖ understand the current operations at each of the centres,
- ❖ explore the purpose and potential of the VAC's,
- ❖ understand the interaction and relationships between the staff working at the centres, the groups who use the centre and CVA,
- ❖ discern any strengths, weaknesses or development issues for the current situation.

The interviews covered these themes and were structured to build on the desk research and to inform all aspects of the given brief. The interviews lasted between one and two hours and the content was fluid and driven by the interviewee within the broad framework outlined in the brief and in the work plan outlined in the appendices.

Desk Research

The desk research looked at the wider issues required by the brief. It reviewed the internal, local and national picture around buildings management.

The government is currently in the midst of a programme concerned with buildings that are based in the community and used for the good of the community. There is a raft of initiatives that support this from the Futurebuilders programme, community asset transfer and the recently

announced initiative looking at community anchors. There is also a growing body of research on ways to manage multi site operations in the voluntary sector and ways to ensure that organisations can improve their effectiveness and efficiency by looking at sharing or centralising backroom services.

The desk research also looked at the borough of Croydon and in particular the areas in which the Voluntary Action Centres were based in order to give background information on the make up and needs of the area.

The research took place during the summer of 2008. It was protracted by the holiday season and staff sickness.

Voluntary Action Centres

The Waterside Centre – acquired 1997

The Waterside Centre is in the South Norwood ward in the north of the borough of Croydon. The area has 62% owner occupied premises and 70% considered themselves in good health. (2001 Census – South Norwood ward). It is located adjacent to South Norwood Lakes at the entrance to the lake and surrounding park.

CVA leases this centre from Croydon Council. It consists of two buildings - a house built originally in 1881 and a pavilion alongside that was built in the 1930s. When the building was first taken over it was in a poor state of repair, with few groups using it, but is now well maintained and is used seven days a week by a combination of statutory, voluntary and community groups. There is a small amount of office space available in the buildings, but it mainly consists of space for community activities.

The centre is operated as a self service centre with all groups responsible for letting themselves in, setting up the space hired for their activity and ensuring the areas used are left clean and tidy and the building secure.

The centre is open daily from 9.00am to 11.00pm Monday to Saturday and 9.00am to 10.00pm on Sundays.

CVA commitment

CVA employs a full-time centre manager, who also responds to out of hours emergencies and takes on out of work hours visiting of groups to ensure the continuity of service and smooth running of the centre.

The part-time maintenance and facilities operative allots time each week to deal with responsive issues and small ongoing maintenance, at the request of the centre manager. Larger maintenance is carried out by the London Borough of Croydon and specialist work is ordered and arranged by the maintenance and facilities operative in negotiation with management.

The manager's job is largely ensuring the strategic direction of the building as a resource for the local community. This includes raising the profile of the building with potential clients and ensuring that it is the building of choice for groups and events in the area. He also works to ensure that it remains an accessible and welcoming building which also contributes to its success as a community hub.

However there is an operational element to the manager's job that brings in a community development aspect of the post. The manager meets with client groups, ensures that they are using the centre correctly and deals with the day to day running problems that occur in a multi-use building. Because of

the length of tenure of the manager and consistent style, this is currently a straightforward task but it should be recognised that this is as a result of the previous work that has been undertaken.

There are few opportunities for one-to-one capacity building with groups using the building, although there are a few examples where this has been successful. In the examples shared, all were proactive initiatives by the manager rather than requests from the groups. There are, however, examples of how the centre manager has carried out capacity building for the centre on a more strategic level, where he has been responsible for bringing groups and activities to the centre to enhance its place in the community and raise the centre's profile with statutory service providers.

The balance between these two roles is a fine one but the amount of development work done with existing clients - and new clients who will harmonise and enhance the centre - means that there is more time available for the strategic part of the job. As the building is promoted as a Healthy Living Centre and priority given to groups running activities under this banner, the manager also has a clear view of the local community and their needs and has ensured that there is a range of activities for different parts of the community (such as new baby clinics, youth activities and the elderly).

Strengths of the Centre	Weaknesses and possible areas for development
The centre is well maintained and obviously fulfilling its role effectively.	The centre would benefit from the establishment of a centre users group or a local residents group
It is welcoming and has a professional, well run atmosphere.	Finance procedures
Its location in a largely residential area on the edge of a park and the South Norwood Lake is attractive.	Outreach Community Development
It is regularly used as a showcase by the council of asset transfer and partnership working between the voluntary and statutory sector.	Capacity building user groups
The activities provided in the centre benefit the local neighbourhood and services operating from the centre are those that families would not easily access or use if they were not provided locally. The portfolio of activities considers and meets the needs of the age and diversity of the local population.	
The manager has the ability to identify needs in the local community and good contacts in the statutory sector to meet those needs. This is evident from the introduction of a number of services and activities to the centre, such as its use as an election polling station and for a Social Services luncheon club.	
The centre is operating at approximately 80% capacity. It needs to maintain some vacant capacity to fulfil its role as a neighbourhood centre and to be able to host short term public events (public meetings and polling) and to be able to encourage new local ideas and initiatives.	

Cornerstone House – acquired 1992

Cornerstone House is in the Selhurst area of Croydon. It is a more industrial than residential area of Croydon and has good transport links. The area is fairly affluent with almost 52% of properties owner-occupied and 66% of residents stating they have good health. (2001 census – Selhurst Ward).

CVA leases this warehouse-style building from the London Borough of Croydon and it is home to the largest concentration of voluntary groups in the borough. Since 1992, it has been refitted and extended and now has 14 furnished offices of various sizes, meeting spaces, computer suite and activity rooms. The building has three floors, with the ground floor including a commercial grade kitchen space, crèche facilities and meeting spaces and the other two floors consisting of offices. It is well maintained and is a welcoming place with a business-like environment.

Cornerstone House is open seven days a week from 9.00am to 11.00pm for activities and access to office spaces. Over half of the centre users only use the venue facilities and do not have office space in the building. Each group is responsible for keeping both their own space and common areas clean and tidy, with cleaners working 5 evenings a week.

CVA commitment

The building has a full time manager, who also supervises the manager of the Waterside Centre and the maintenance and facilities operative. The maintenance and facilities operative has notionally one day a week allotted to Cornerstone House.

There is a long waiting list for groups to use the building as a base and successful groups stay for a number of years. The manager has a development role and works with the groups in the building, offering advice to help them build their capacity and become more sustainable.

Groups joining the building have a license that outlines the terms and conditions of using the space and outlines the centre's rules. There is also an extensive induction process that introduces the custom and practice of the building. This combination of formal paperwork and the initial face to face induction contributes to the overall smooth running of the centre and should be recognised as a major contributory factor in its success as a third sector resource centre. It allows groups to get to know the manager, other groups in the building and the systems of sharing space and equipment. Having a single point of contact also helps avoid different interpretation of the practical application of the building's rules. Inevitably having long term, well established groups in the building also helps with educating and embedding new groups on the expectations of license holders.

As well as a development role, liaison between the manager and the groups using the building also allows the manager to ensure the space is used

efficiently. He is able to move groups to larger or smaller offices or suggest they share space to ensure that each groups needs are met. This accounts for the sound financial footing of the building and close credit control within the building. Because the building is managed as a project of CVA, the manager not only receives financial reports from the CVA central finance team but keeps his own more detailed records of rental payments and credit control. This is vital with small groups that may only be receiving money on an occasional basis. Local knowledge allows timely intervention with debt collection.

Cornerstone House currently hosts 20 voluntary groups. Some will be in shared accommodation and others as sole users of an office space. Groups are signposted to the centre by CVA, the local authority and other statutory services or by word and mouth. The groups do not have to be a CVA member to use the facilities.

There is a long waiting list and as there is such a low turnover it can take a number of years to get a place in the building. This reflects the limited availability of similar premises in Croydon for a similar rent and, probably more importantly, that the centre is a community of shared learning and opportunity for the third sector.

However because of the changing nature of the voluntary sector, building usage for occasional rented venue space is not static and has a much quicker turnover of regular users. This helps keep the centre vibrant and in touch with the third sector initiatives.

Because of the number of groups based at Cornerstone House, it is also used by CVA, and statutory bodies for events that it wishes to target the third sector, as higher turnouts for events are more likely to be assured. This is a positive gain for both the groups and for providers of services seeking to inform and update the third sector. The manager encourages the use of the venue in this way, which adds to the a vision of a building and a centre where voluntary sector groups are able to grow.

Strengths of the Centre	Weaknesses and possible areas for development
Has a clear, well-defined set of rules and procedures that are well represented to groups using the centre for the first time.	Low turnover of groups can make it difficult for newer groups to become part of the Cornerstone House 'community'
The centre is financially efficient and has strong financial controls.	
The centre has a large and varied set of users for occasional rented venue space.	
The building is seen by statutory bodies as one of the borough's main third sector resource centres and an important point of contact for consultation and the provision of information for voluntary and community groups.	

Thornton Heath Healthy Living Centre

This is a leisure venue that houses the CVA Capital Volunteering project and that also provides the administrative back up for the suite of rooms that forms the Thornton Heath Healthy Living Centre. The rooms are available for rent by groups wishing to run healthy lifestyle activities.

There appears to be little input to users beyond the administration of rent collection. There does not appear to be any capacity building taking place and users seem to vary from a range of voluntary and community groups to individual therapists.

Nevertheless, the centre is viewed as a useful asset to the CVA portfolio, as it provides affordable space and services for the community and makes a profit for CVA.

Strengths of the Centre	Weaknesses and possible areas for development
Financially viable project that produces a surplus.	No added value to users or beneficiaries because of CVA involvement.

Healthy Croydon Resource Centre

This is a new-build centre that will provide office and community space for the voluntary sector. Over 30 groups will be able to access the offices and there are plans for an internet café.

The style of management for this centre will be determined based on the findings of this report and resources currently available. Consideration also needs to be given to building maintenance when designing the best management model. New buildings frequently have teething problems with infrastructure services, building flaws and unexpected repairs, all of which need to be closely monitored to avoid cost over-runs and additional building work.

All other CVA buildings are leased from the local authority, which can be called upon for advice and support with larger maintenance issues. There appears to be the development of considerable facilities maintenance knowledge within CVA, which will be needed as soon as the building work has been completed.

Services to support Facilities Management

As well as ensuring that the primary purpose of a new-build centre is thoroughly thought through and that services for users are in place, CVA needs to be ready for respond to the management of the building's maintenance.

While the promotion of a building is often around the services that are on offer or delivered from the building, the fabric of the building and its maintenance can cause the most headaches and the support services like finance and IT support can damage the reputation of even the best delivered services.

Maintenance

CVA employs a part time maintenance operative (15.5 hours a week over 3 days) who works between all the CVA run sites. His job tasks are not solely maintenance and includes a number of support activities for CVA eg recycling and moving equipment for events. There is also volunteer help at Waterside. The work required is listed and prioritised by the Cornerstone manager. Generally a day is allocated to Cornerstone and Waterside, although this can be reassigned according to need. Work carried out is monitored and checked by the manager on the site worked.

The lease for the VACs outlines the various maintenance commitments that are the responsibility of the local authority and those of CVA. This has recently been reviewed and generally CVA is responsible for minor responsive maintenance. The member of staff has a background in carpentry, but as with most maintenance operatives, has a working knowledge of general trades. The specialist trades like Electrical and H&V are bought in. The maintenance worker arranges and supervises this. Over time a list of favoured suppliers has been built up based on experience and trial and error. There are a number of accounts held for supplies and other tools and consumables are bought using an imprest float. There does not seem to be any review of accounts over time and it may be worth reviewing this as there are often discounts for new accounts. There are also few benefits of paying in cash nowadays so it may be worth exploring a credit card for maintenance that is safer and less administrative than running an imprest account

There is a budget for responsive maintenance and a sinking fund for larger pieces of work and cyclical maintenance. The maintenance worker has no knowledge of budgets or planning cyclical maintenance but notices work to be done and raises issues with the managers. He has a working understanding of health & safety issues and will raise work needed against this agenda with managers. Nobody was aware of a formal cyclical maintenance programme, although there was obviously awareness of the need for on going work and an understanding of including this in the day to day work.

Until recently the maintenance worker had a small van to work from. This acted as a mobile workshop and enabled him to travel between the sites and carry equipment for other staff members.

Finance

Cornerstone and Waterside are treated as projects for CVA accounting purposes. They have their own cost code and form part of the overall budget for the organisation.

Cornerstone was set up slightly differently as it was the first centre and therefore has a number of its own systems. Some run in tandem with the central finance systems and some are stand alone. The auditors commented on these differences and there are plans to standardise systems across the organisation in such a way to not impact on the efficiency of the VACs. For example in the interests of security there should not be one person raising and issuing invoices and collecting the money. This could be overcome by shared IT systems that would allow them to be authorised electronically. Other issues are being worked through and addressed.

The biggest difficulty is the fact that the VACs are different projects in accounting purposes in a number of ways. They do not have a finite sum of money but operate more like a trading account with activity driven by increased income that is raised as a result of more activity. However this appears not to be used as such and increases in activity are treated as a trading surplus which the centres then use. This differs from project funding where there is a finite income and activity that has to reflect this.

Managers also have a difficulty with the percentage that forms the contribution to core costs. I think this is because, unlike project funding where this is agreed in a bid document or agreed by the funder, with the ongoing nature of the VACs, this is calculated and recalculated at budget setting time and is therefore seen more as an expense rather than a sum of money that was never part of the project.

Centralised finance works for the rest of the organisation but the two large VACs are still somewhat outside the system. There are no concerns around the accuracy and efficiency of the systems in place just that it is good practice to have one set of systems across an organisation and this will allow for better scrutiny, management and ease of cover when needed.

The finance director is fully conversant with the needs of the centres and how they need to be revised in line with the auditors requirements and not effect the smooth running of the centre. This should include local banking, authorisation of invoices and a more standardised payment system by tenants. Changes and new systems need to be formed with VAC managers and then included in the organisations finance manual.

Administrative and other support

There are a number of services that support the work of the VACs. These include central administration, PR and the support from the local authority as the landlord of Cornerstone and Waterside.

In the course of this research I spoke to the CVA office manager and the local authority Community Partnerships policy manager.

Both had a high regard for the work carried out in Cornerstone and Waterside and enjoyed working with the centres and personnel.

The CVA office manages the HR support of staff and helps with holiday cover for the VACs. Staff interviewed have said the current systems in place were easy to understand and operate, and are well thought through.

The office manager is happy to refer groups to these centres for accommodation. There was little awareness that anything further was provided by the centres.

The local authority officer has an ongoing relationship with the VAC managers and they meet on a 6 monthly timetable to keep each other informed on relevant issues. The local authority value these meetings and are pleased that CVA drive them forward as pressures of work within the council would probably mean they would slip. The relationship is also such that either party is happy to contact each other for advice or with information when needed eg a recent question around the legal structure of a group and its suitability to use a VAC.

There was a lot of praise for the way in which CVA has maintained and developed the assets and the local authority and – while welcoming the Community Asset transfer programme – the London Borough of Croydon feel that a longer than 20 year lease would be of more use. The council is clearly looking at more buildings for release to the VCS under the Community Asset transfer programme. However it feels that this review of the centres is a welcome activity and that development plans for each of the centres would give new impetus to the management.

Analysis of findings

There are currently three operating Voluntary Action Centres that have been the focus of this research and it is hoped that by undertaking this piece of work the best practice will be brought to bear on the new Croydon Healthy Resource Centre and inform improved services in the other three centres.

Within CVA there seems to be a consistent view that having Voluntary Action Centres is a good thing but there is not a consistent reason why this is the case. Some view it just as a source of income or a means to provide a service for statutory partners. Others view it as a way for CVA to have a presence in other parts of the borough. The managers of the centres are clear on the operational brief attached to their centres and what it provides for their direct beneficiaries. There is less consistency about the vision for VACs in CVA.

Each of the three centres studied appear to have a different purpose and as such have different management models.

If we look at other examples beyond CVA we can identify similar models for each of the centres and draw on the value, mission and activities of these models.

Waterside House

Waterside House is much more of a centre for the local community and is closer to the governments Community Anchor model.

In 2007 the Department of Communities and Local Government produced the following definition of a Community Anchor.

"These are independent community led organisations with multi-purpose functions, which provide a focal point for local communities and community organisations, and for community services. They often own and manage community assets, and support small community organisations to reach out across the community."

Community Alliance took this definition a stage further to determine eight characteristics that would help identify a Community Anchor. If we look at those characteristics we can see the similarities with Waterside and it gives some ideas for future development.

1. A physical space that is community controlled.
2. A focus for services and activities meeting local need

3 A vehicle for local voices to be heard, needs to be identified and for local leaders and community groups to be supported

4 A platform for community development, promoting cohesion while respecting diversity

5 A home for the community sector which is supportive of the growth and development of community groups

6 A means of promoting community led enterprise, generating independent income while having a social, economic and environmental impact.

7 A forum for dialogue within communities, creating community led solutions.

8 A bridge between communities and the state which promotes and brings about social change

Waterside has been evolving in this direction with the recent work of encouraging the use of the centre for public consultation, local housing surgeries and a polling station. It has also had a key role in providing a community focus for campaigning, for example for better transport links.

To become a community anchor involves a different type of community development and capacity building from that traditionally delivered by a CVS. In this model the community development professional is developing individuals, identifying community leaders and giving them the tools to identify achievable improvements in the area, motivate the wider community and develop actions, projects and campaigns that have a local impact. CVA is fortunate in having a manager who has many of these inherent community development skills and the strategic vision for the locality.

Many of the local authorities in London are looking at Community Asset Transfer of buildings to the third sector and in east London this often includes community centres that were traditionally built on housing estates to provide a meeting place and facility for that estate. The success of Waterside would suggest that CVA has the skills within its organisation to take on these type of buildings and successfully develop them for the community. These skills could also open community empowerment and community leadership work to the portfolio of CVA services.

Possible areas for development

1. Continue the mix between activities for the community and public information and services to improve the local residents
2. Look at other models of neighbourhood community centres and organisations that develop community leaders.
3. Review training needs of staff in light of this newly defined area of work.

Cornerstone House

Cornerstone House follows the model of a Voluntary Sector Resource Centre. These are recognised as buildings who provide a range of premises options and support services solely to the Voluntary Sector. The popularity of these to the sector and funders lies in the catalyst affect that the building and workers have on the groups using the centre.

Many boroughs are exploring the possibility of setting up such centres and these have been supported by Capacitybuilders and Big Lottery funding and the model praised by the Minister for the Third Sector. Desk research into these centres have found that all have a staff team that support and develop the groups, provide admin, finance and IT support and a manager with strategic vision for the development of the centre.

Cornerstone House already brings together the main facets of this model but has the advantage of a longer history than many of the current resource centres. CVA central support services provide aspects of this model, although the staffing is slightly different with just a stand alone member of staff at Cornerstone. An example of a Resource Centre in Ealing has one full time member of staff and 4 part time staff providing support services that bring the staffing up to 2 full time equivalents. The difference between these two centres is that the one in Ealing is new and so needs to build up capacity and embed activities and user groups. It also does not have an organisation like CVA providing central support. The extra staff however do allow for a wider portfolio of services with the loan of resources, printing and photocopying and customised capacity building for groups that are both based within the building and from wider afield.

At Cornerstone the manager combines the ability to deliver the overall strategic vision for the centre with a wealth of people skills, the ability to capacity build organisations and property management. The low turnover, long waiting list and obvious development of groups using the centre is testament to how successful the centre currently is and should continue to be. CVA should harness this range of skills and expertise and ensure they are shared within the new centre in the same way they were obviously passed on to the manager of the newer Waterside centre. By using the supporting policies, practices and experience it should be possible to compress the induction and start up time in a new building so reducing costs, staff time and problems that some other resource centres may encounter.

This may mean that for an initial period of time there is less staff commitment at Cornerstone. I think the recent period of absence has shown that this is feasible. However I am not sure if this period has also included the turnover of user groups and would question whether a prolonged period without the strong management and implementation of policies and procedures would impact on the smooth running of the place. I would also be concerned that

the capacity building of groups would be affected by a prolonged absence which could impact on the credit control of the building. Our own experience at collecting rents and ensuring that use of space has been maximised in our own centres has always relied on somebody who is a constant integral part of the building and able to pick up the informal needs and actions of groups as well as using the more formal procedures.

Possible areas of development.

1. Combine a development action plan with the license agreement for each new tenant. This would outline a plan for growth towards sustainability and includes linkages to other CVA services.
2. Develop links with other sympathetic premises providers to ensure there is a through put of tenants and the ones using Cornerstone need the specialist skills of capacity building provided by CVA.
3. Develop more supporting and capacity building activities in the building for tenants eg Meet the funder events and possibly voluntary sector purchasing deals for the building where by all tenants join together to buy everyday consumables like stationery at a discount. These could be provided by Cornerstone staff or in liaison with other parts of CVA.
4. Raise the profile and promote the expertise and good practice in Cornerstone to other organisations running buildings for the statutory sector.

Thornton Heath Healthy Living Centre

The Thornton Heath Healthy Living Centre is the nearest VAC to a commercial enterprise that lets specialist space. There seems to be little added value to beneficiaries or users of the space other than an affordable venue and a range of services that would not otherwise be accessible either through cost or location.

It is this lack of intervention that makes this a profitable part of CVA. But I would also question if just managing space fulfils the charitable aims of the organisation, or would it sit better as a social enterprise or trading activity of CVA.

I think it may be worth exploring a few questions here to help determine the development of this service.

- ❖ I was unable to ascertain if there is any staff input to proactively manage the range of services that are provided from this venue or to

ensure that they change and / or respond to the wider communities needs.

- ❖ Is the centre promoted under the CVA branding and does CVA take an active role in promoting the services provided – or is each tenant seen as a sole trader responsible for all their own operations and just has a tenant / landlord arrangement with CVA?
- ❖ Is there any development interaction or any other form of monitoring of the quality of services provided by tenants?
- ❖ Organisations and services provided at this centre could benefit from CVA membership for their own development, if they fulfil the membership criteria. There could also then be opportunities at other VAC centres – particularly Waterside with its Healthy Living brief.

Maintenance

The maintenance provision within CVA seems to have evolved into the current state and it feels as if it needs to be reviewed in line with current and possible future needs.

Maintenance services are used across the entire organisation although currently the majority of the work is based at the VACs. If more satellite sites are bought on board there will need to be an extension of the current service and this will raise a number of questions.

The entire maintenance function could be outsourced, but this would not be practical for the time and training that would need to be given to one or more members of staff to buy in necessary services. It also invariably works out a more expensive option as bringing in outside contractors for every piece of work incurs call out charges and would rely on staff commissioning work to have a level of understanding to negotiate with contractors.

- ❖ Will extending the hours of the current member of staff meet this need or will there be a need for another member of staff? If a new member of staff is employed where will they be based and will they be dedicated to a building or be mobile?
- ❖ It is better to have more time available and build in the cross site function as this gives CVA more possibility of covering responsive emergencies from within the organisation.
- ❖ With an extension of the maintenance function will the management currently in place meet the increased need?

- ❖ Another model could be to train a maintenance member of staff to have a more supervisory role and include them in budget making, credit control and devising a workplan for cyclical maintenance from the sinking fund.

There is a need for a workshop space to maintain tools, equipment and consumables. As the worker currently visits all sites it would be sensible to have this as a mobile workshop rather than taking space and equipping all sites. There is also the additional uses for a vehicle and if more satellite sites are taken on there could be a need for courier type services between the centres as well as transporting staff.

Croydon council currently has approximately 45 buildings leased to the voluntary sector. Each of these must have similar maintenance needs to CVA buildings. It may be worth exploring the possibility of working together with some of these buildings to share expertise in facilities management and maintenance skills. Using the *bassac* Sharing Without Merging (SWIM) model this could work to the advantage of all concerned and may bring in an income stream for CVA.

Recommendations

1. CVA has a very broad charitable objective “To promote any charitable purposes for the benefit of the community in the London Borough of Croydon...”

However there does not seem to be a clear agreed purpose for operating the Voluntary Action Centres. As this report explains they each have a different role and serve a different client group. Much of the misunderstanding about their role and ability seems to stem from this confusion. It would be useful to examine and define the strategic advantages to CVA of operating the Voluntary Action Centres and to check that each enhances CVA’s portfolio of services.

Once this has been defined it may be easier to identify the best place for the three buildings, and future additions, to sit in the organisational structure and determine the best reporting mechanisms for each. They may not all be best placed together or there may need to be a new structural area that brings property management and maintenance together.

Identify the strategic advantage to CVA of running Voluntary Action Centres and how this can be maximised in response to Government agendas.

2. What is the primary purpose of each building? As this report demonstrates each of the VACs has a different client group and provide skills and actions to respond to that group. However as each is different it is difficult to define if what they are doing is successful and also difficult to compare one with another. By defining the key purpose of the building and what success looks like for each building it should be possible to begin to monitor and develop the centres as well as giving a clear place in the organisation that all staff can understand.

Currently if any of the centres were approached to start a new initiative there would not be a coherent method to determine if it would enhance or hinder the purpose of the centre or add to CVA.

The management and development of each of the VACs needs to be more strategic and better embedded within the wider work of CVA. This should clarify the role of each VAC.

3. At the current time it is evident that the work being carried out in the centres is responding to the needs of beneficiaries and that either centre is meeting

the local needs. However within CVA and externally there is little understanding about the exact detail and quality of work delivered. As this is not defined it is also difficult to clearly identify development plans for the centre or measure success. It would therefore be helpful to look at setting a standard for each centre that achievement can be measured against. This would be best done using an externally recognised standard so it gains wider understanding and would help with the recognition and promotion of work done in the centres.

There are a number of quality systems that have been developed around community buildings and CVA would need to review them to determine the one best suited the centre. The ones I would consider would be:

- ❖ ChangeCheck – a recent programme by *bassac* that looks at giving a community more say in a community venue,
- ❖ Visible Communities – which gives operating standards for community organisations, and
- ❖ Social Auditing – that takes the starting point for working with stakeholders as the objects of the organisation and asks how we do that in this instance.

Each of these would result in the users of the buildings having more say in the activities of the building and CVA would need to be prepared to recognise endorse the process.

Implement a quality standard that will measure achievement in the centres against an agreed standard and help establish a programme of continuous improvement.

4. Maintenance and facilities support is a CVA wide issue and while the VACs occupy the majority of the workers time at present this could change as more satellite centres come on board and the whole picture needs to be considered. At present the member of staff is employed 15.5 hours a week and is under the line management of Cornerstone manager. CVA needs to decide if it is going to invest in the maintenance and facilities management function or not. There is a clear need for a workshop and it would be more sensible to combine this with the need to move from site to site. However there may also be other calls on a CVA vehicle that could reduce costs and improve the efficiency of other parts of the organisation.

There needs to be a review of the current and future maintenance and premises facilitation needs. This may include training needs for current personnel.

5. A review of the financial procedures and practices in each of the centres to find a more coherent policy that will not hinder the smooth running and credit

control of each centre but will bring practices in line with current auditor requirements and the wider practices of the CVA.

Finance policies and procedures need to be brought in line with auditors and wider CVA. These should be implemented with training and a financial procedures manual.

Appendices

Project Brief

VOLUNTARY ACTION CENTRES REVIEWING MANAGEMENT MODEL

1. Aim

To evaluate the current management models at CVA's Voluntary Action Centres (VACs) on the basis of effectiveness and efficiency; developing from the review a set of recommendations for their future management.

2. Background

- CVA currently runs three VACs with a fourth, its most ambitious, launching this year
- CVA faces competition from private and voluntary sector agencies (i.e. Croydon Business Venture, CPHA, ARCC, CNCA etc) in accommodating VCS organisations and activities in Croydon
- CVA needs to consider the long-term financial sustainability of its VACs

3. The Commission

CVA has decided to review the management of its VACs and will commission an external agent, specialising in VCS property management, to carry out the review. The commission will deliver an independent study of the management models operating at each VAC and present recommendations for their future management. The commission will also identify any opportunities CVA has to provide added value by extending its property management role to offer advice and support to other agencies managing community assets in Croydon.

4. The Brief

Stage 1:

To review and evaluate operations at each of the existing VACs by:

- Registering the full scale of operations at each VAC, as reflected in the roles, tasks and responsibilities of (i) VAC Managers and (ii) CVA support staff (handyperson; finance; admin) and evaluating the effectiveness of the services being delivered

- Carrying out a cost-benefit analysis at each VAC based on quantifiable outputs and outcomes
- Examining the HCRC Business Plan and recommending a preferred management model based on (i) CVA's experience to date of managing VACs; (ii) any opportunities identified for achieving economies of scale across the four VACs – pooling resources, stretching in-kind support, sharing systems etc and (iii) any opportunities identified for income generation (i.e. social enterprise)

Stage 2:

To identify opportunities for CVA to extend its expertise in premises management to provide a wider advice, development and support service

Stage 3:

To identify options for the future management of CVA's four VACs, appraising each option on the basis of:

- Effectiveness – providing a quality service
- Innovation – achieving added value
- Efficiency – achieving value for money

Work Plan

CVA building assessment – Programme of work

Summary of work schedule

8 Days work

- 1.5 days desk research
- 3 days interviews and field research
- 2 days analysis and report writing
- 0.5 day presentation and discussion of draft report
- 0.5 day finalise and complete report
- 0.5 day presentation of final report

Scope of Report

1. Interviews with key personnel involved in running of centres
 - Finance Director
 - Capacity building manager
 - CVA Centre managers
 - Maintenance staff
 - Admin staff related to the running of the building
 - Council contact as landlord
2. Field Research to look at the activities and literature related to each centre. Look at other local centres and get a picture of needs and opportunities in each area – this will be quite superficial as time will not allow to much in depth research
3. Desk research looking at surrounding areas and other similar centres
 - Desk research to review CVA documentation and draw out pertinent details for analysis.
 - Desk research to look at current trends in government policy etc and how this may provide opportunities for CVA
4. Analysis of interviews, desk and field research to identify key themes , models of good practice and areas for improvement, including value for money of each centre.
 - Analysis of key findings against models of successful community building management and current ideas of building management.
5. Recommendations of good practice that can be extended and replicated across CVA or beyond.

Recommendations of economies of efficiency to improve the management and delivery of CVA centres.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all members of staff who participated in this review, and the support that was given throughout the process.

I would also like to thank David Freeman of the London Borough of Croydon for his time and input.

Caroline Rouse