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# **Voluntary Action Camden**

## **Evaluation of Better Governance through Workforce Development Programme**

**March 2013**

## 1. Introduction

1.1 The Better Governance through Workforce Development Project was set up by VAC to provide support and training to small and medium sized voluntary organisations in Camden. It was a five-year project, running from April 2008 – March 2013, funded by the Big Lottery Fund providing:

- one-to-one support on organisational development;
- tailored training to trustees on five key areas: governance, strategic planning, financial management, partnership and legal duties of trustees;
- a 3-day accredited course on 'Introduction to Teaching and Learning' for potential co-trainers;
- co-training opportunities in the above five areas for a pool of 15 trustee co-trainers; and
- training on how to become self-employed for those co-training.

1.2 A robust monitoring and evaluation process, linked to its outcomes and milestones, was established from the outset of the project. This included an audit of participants' skills at the beginning and end of their training, to assess their distance travelled, as well as qualitative feedback about their experience of the course itself. This evaluation builds on that work, focusing particularly on the key features of the programme and the delivery model, primarily from the perspective of trustees themselves. It also explores ways of taking the model forward in the current funding environment. Its findings are based on interviews with key informants including:

- 2 focus groups with trustees who had completed the training (7 trustees);
- 1 focus group with 3 out of 4 members of the steering group;
- telephone interviews with trustees including co-trainers (7 interviews);
- telephone interview with the former project manager.

1.3 Initially we had hoped to speak to a broader range of trustees, but many were lost to follow-up. This is perhaps not surprising with a course that has been running for five years, but it does make it more difficult to assess the longer term impact of trustee training on organisations and individuals. However, our results are consistent with the monitoring data that we have seen, suggesting that the picture would not look very different had we spoken to more people.

1.4 Below we provide a brief overview of the monitoring data and a more in-depth analysis of the interviews and focus group discussions carried out as part of this evaluation. Quotes from those interviews are used to illustrate the key points coming out of the research. Wherever possible we have used those that typify the general view, but we have also identified points of

disagreement, where one or two people may not have agreed with the prevailing consensus. This enables us to develop a more rounded picture of the programme and its delivery. Our conclusions focus specifically on the model used to deliver this programme and how it might be taken forward in the current economic environment.

## **2. Project overview**

2.1 The monitoring data suggests that the Better Governance programme reached a wide range of organisations, working with people of all ages; BME communities; tenants groups and others; as well as providing a diversity of activities, including advice, training, counselling, sport and play. It also achieved its target of reaching small and medium organisations, for example approximately half of the organisations represented had no paid staff members.

2.2 The programme consisted of 5 training sessions, each focusing on one of the following key areas:

- governance and operations;
- the legal duties of trustees;
- strategic planning and leadership;
- financial management; and
- collaboration and partnership working.

2.3 The training ran three times a year, daytime and evening. By year 4 (2011-2012) each session/programme was attended by an average of 20 trustees, meaning that the project reached a total of 64 trustees from 41 organisations over the course of the year. This exceeded the expected target of 35 trustees from 10 organisations per year. Also by this time more participants were completing the whole programme.

2.4 Participants were asked to complete a skills audit before and after each training session to assess what they had learned. Almost all trustees reported an increase in their skills and knowledge after the training, some significantly so, particularly those with lower scores at the outset. They were also asked to rate different elements of the course, using a range of indicators. These findings suggest that participants rated the training highly: every session achieved a positive scoring of 80% or more on all indicators, with the majority achieving at least 90%.

2.5 With regard to the other elements of the programme, by the end of the fourth year 13 people had been trained as co-trainers and most, but not all, had been given opportunities to co-train with VAC. One-to-support was provided to 24 small community organisations on a range of organisational development areas.

## **3. The role of the Steering Group**

3.1 A Steering Group was set up to advise the Project Manager on the development and progress of the Better Governance programme. Members brought to the group experience of being a trustee; knowledge of local communities and community organisations; an understanding environment in which these organisations operate, and how this is changing. They also had experience of training, either as deliverers or users, and at least two members

of the group completed the Better Governance Training Programme. This meant that they were well-placed to advise and guide the work as it progressed. Key aspects of their role included:

- advising how best to engage with trustees from under-represented groups, particularly those from BME communities and small, unfunded organisations;
- ensuring that the course met the diverse needs of different groups of trustees; and
- making positive changes to the programme as it developed to improve attendance and retention.

3.2 The project manager confirmed this picture of the group's role and the practical support it had provided in terms of shaping and developing the programme.

#### **4. Project Outreach and Retention**

4.1 Voluntary and community organisations have been operating in an increasingly harsh environment in recent years, with public spending cuts impacting on them and/or their beneficiaries. It is therefore impressive that the programme was exceeding its targets by year 4: in such circumstances training is often the first thing to suffer, even for those without funding, for whom time is a precious resource. There are a number of reasons why this was the case, which need to be taken into account in any future programmes.

4.2 Firstly, the project manager, supported by the steering group, was committed to an active programme of outreach. As well as promoting the programme through the website and newsletters she also went out to meet with trustees from small organisations and BME community groups. In this way she was able to engage with and support those who had no clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities and therefore would not necessarily seek training or respond to a general notice. By meeting with them and sending them reminders about the course she was able to make them feel welcome and see the training as something for them. In her view this active outreach is the most effective way of going beyond the 'usual suspects'.

4.3 Secondly, VAC has a good reputation locally and is seen as somewhere people can go to for support. At least three people we spoke to had initially approached VAC for help in starting up a new charity and were then told about the programme. Others had sought advice in the past on specific issues, eg human resources, and had found advisers to be helpful and knowledgeable:

*'I initially approached VAC because I was struggling with setting up a new charity. They were very helpful and recommended this training. VAC helps to make you feel you are not alone.'*

*'VAC has a very good reputation and I'd had support from them before, so that attracted me to the course.'*

4.4 Thirdly, a number of trustees had been on VAC training courses before and had found them to be of a high standard, so this influenced their decision to sign up for this programme. For one person this had been her first experience, but she has since returned for further training:

*'The standard is very high at VAC. I went there quite cynical, but I learned so much that I've since done the co-training course and now I've signed up to do a peer-mentoring course.'*

4.5 Getting people to stay for the whole programme when they have busy lives and are already giving up time to be a trustee was also a challenge, particularly in the initial stages of the project. Here the Steering Group played an important role, advising that there should be greater flexibility in the way that the course was run. For example, trainees should be able to choose whether to attend in the daytime or in the evening, or 'mix and match' according to their needs. SG members said this change had made a real difference, encouraging better take-up of the courses, as reflected in the internal monitoring. Certainly interviews with trainees showed that they valued this flexibility.

*'I was impressed by the way the programme was organised, so you could build up your learning in stages. Its always difficult with so many other things going on, but it really helped that you could attend daytime or evening sessions. I could fit it around me.'*

## **5. Course Content**

5.1 All those we spoke to agreed that the five key areas (governance and operations; the legal duties of trustees; strategic planning; financial management; and partnership working) were the right topics, as one person said:

*'The topics fitted, it did what it said on the tin. It was quite detailed and I liked that each topic had a core element with the option to learn more.'*

5.2 The sessions on governance and operations and the legal duties of trustees were said to have been particularly useful, giving people the basics on which they could build. For new charities, this aspect of the programme helped them to 'get started'; for others it helped them to understand and negotiate the boundaries between trustees, staff and volunteers, which in smaller organisations tend to be much more fluid:

*'The governance training showed us what we needed to do and the right way of doing things, we could then put what we learned into practice in a consistent way.'*

*'Governance was most important for me: in our organisation the main difficulty was getting the relationship between the Director and the Board right, rather than the Director making all the decisions. So it has helped me to gradually change that culture.'*

5.3 Other aspects of the programme chimed differently with different people, according to their needs and concerns. For example, some were particularly interested in partnership working because this was something their organisation was considering; others highlighted managing resources (human and financial):

*'The training has really helped us develop partnerships and sharpened our approach to working in consortia. As a Board we've been identifying which services we could deliver in partnership.'*

*'Our organisation relies a lot on staff and volunteers ... I now look at this more as an employer, making sure we're doing the right things throughout the organisation, for*

*example making sure volunteers are getting something back. The same with finances, I've learned to ask the right questions.'*

5.4 There were mixed opinions about the strategic planning and leadership session. One person was strongly of the opinion that it was little more than 'mantras invented by management consultants'. However another trainee, who had attended a later course, said that the session 'had made a significant difference to me'. The difference may reflect individual learning styles or it could be that the course had developed over time and therefore had become more attuned to the needs of trainees.

5.6 There was also some criticism of the session on finance, primarily because it did not go into sufficient depth. However, this was from two more experienced trustees. According to the monitoring data, most participants reported that they were better able to understand accounts and the budget process, and were more confident in financial management, as a result of this part of the programme.

5.7 Overall the course 'did what it said on the tin' and there was general agreement that the topics themselves were the right ones. All said that they would recommend it to others and most were emphatic about this. However, there was also an awareness that the world is changing very rapidly and it was suggested that any future programme would also need to get trustees up to speed with the new funding environment, particularly around commissioning, which is having a significant impact on voluntary and community organisations in the Borough.

## **6. Pitch**

6.1 The course was targeted at trustees of smaller organisations and particularly those working with BME communities and most comments suggest that it was pitched at the right level for its audience:

*'What's good about the training was that it met the needs of organisations with no money.'*

*'The course lent itself to different organisations at different stages of development.'*

6.2 Three people, including the project manager, said that it would have been more useful to have had separate 'beginners' and 'advanced' courses, based on trainees' level of knowledge or experience. However, others disagreed with this and said they liked the fact that people came to the course with different backgrounds and experience:

*'I did the course to refresh my knowledge, but I came to it with another, very new trustee and we both got a lot out of it. I was impressed by the depth of information on the course.'*

*'The training was pitched at the right level, even for me, though I've been in it for a long time, it didn't assume I had no idea. Its given people a better understanding of what is expected of them.'*

*'It would be a loss not to have the diversity of experience and different types of organisation. There was ample space for discussion on issues that people brought to the session and I liked the way the tutor steered those discussions. That was a real highlight.'*

6.3 Several interviewees suggested that the quality of the trainers was uneven: some were very good and had a wealth of examples that they could draw on, but others seemed unable to go beyond the handouts. In general it was felt that there could have been a stronger emphasis on practical examples throughout the course:

*'I would have preferred to have had more practical examples and case studies – how other organisations have addressed these issues. And more visual materials: I've now tailored the materials for my organization, but I know others on the course who struggled with the language as well as trying to understand the concepts.'*

## **7. Resources**

7.1 When asked about particular highlights of the programme, people tended to pick out those that met their needs and priorities at the time. However, they also valued that the fact that they can (and do) refer back to the written course materials as and when they need to:

*'When I did the initial training, I had only just begun. Having the tools and resources means that I can now go back to them and use them as I need them in everyday life.'*

*'The written material was excellent, a great resource to have and return to when you need to look things up. Really useful to have it all in one place.'*

It was agreed that these resources were of a very high standard. The only suggestions for improvement concerned logistics rather than content:

*'Handouts should be given all together in one booklet, it would be more productive and quicker to refer to sections.'*

*'More information should be sent out before the class, it helps people to prepare for the session and come with questions.'*

## **8. One-to-One Support**

8.1 As part of the programme, organisations were eligible for one-to-one support on organisational development, alongside the training for trustees. Only two participants involved in this evaluation had received this additional support, although both had found it valuable; of these one was from a larger organisation and the other was closely involved with the programme. Others did not appear to know about it. Indeed, they were unsure whether they could contact a tutor outside of the class, which they would have liked to have done, let alone ask for tailored support.

8.2 The project manager said that this element of the programme was not as effective as it could or should have been, even though it was actively promoted. She thought this was because there could have been more active follow up with trainees once they had finished the programme, to find out where they thought the gaps were in their organisation. Our findings suggest that trainees would have welcomed such follow-up, if only to ask questions about putting their learning into practice and helping to embed this in their organisation.

## **9. Benefits to organisations and individuals**

9.1 The Better Governance programme aimed to equip trustees with the knowledge and skills needed to provide appropriate and effective leadership, strategic direction and fiscal oversight

of their organisations. This evaluation found that participants were more confident in their role as trustees as a result of the training and that many had shared what they had learned with others on their board, suggesting a potential 'cascade' effect:

*'It has given me much greater awareness, so I'm better at identifying issues when they arise and better able to handle them. I've recommended the course to others on the board in the hope that they will take it up. For me it has had a renewing effect.'*

*'The course has led me on to other things, teaching others in my organisation about what I've learned on the course. After each session I used the materials to prepare resources in advance for other trustees and explained the key issues to them.'*

*'It made me really understand what our role as a management committee is and I've been able to take that back to the other trustees. Its helped me to get to grips with the policies we need to have in place and I'm now using the tools to help us develop our strategy and business planning.'*

*'I feel much more confident in my role as a trustee. I no longer feel stuck or alone, I'm much better equipped with answers, or know where to get the answers.'*

9.2 As well as being better informed about their role and responsibilities, participants also identified very practical changes that had taken place as a result of the training. For example, one person had learned about PQASSO quality standards on the course, which she has since used in her organisation to improve performance. Others referred to particular policies they had put in place as a result of the programme and / or how it has helped with strategic planning:

*'As a result of the course we planned an away day for our organisation. We realized that we hadn't been involved in business planning with staff. There was some opposition to this, but we went ahead anyway and it was really positive. It was the first time staff and trustees had worked together on something.'*

*'I'm still using the materials and the knowledge from the course to help me. I've used them to develop our policies and I'm now working on our strategy and business planning. It has also helped me deal better with conflict situations: I'm more confident now about what my role is, so I can steer gently rather than insist on change.'*

## **10. Co-training**

10.1 VAC also selected a number of trustees who had completed the programme to become potential co-trainers. Those selected attended an accredited *Introduction to teaching and learning* course which would enable them to become co-trainers on the Better Governance programme, or become self-employed as trainers if they wished. Talking to those who took on this additional training, all said it had helped them consolidate what they had learned about governance, because they had to think about how they presented that to others. All were very positive about the course itself and what they had learned, commenting that it had significantly increased their confidence. However, while it is clear that participants found it beneficial, this was largely for personal rather than professional reasons:

*'I did the co-training course because I wanted to put something back into the community after I'd done the governance training. But I feel it has unlocked my potential, I feel the*

*sky's the limit, I could venture into this if I gave up my day job. I never thought I could be useful.'*

*'I'm not sure how much I use those skills in co-training, they don't really fit in with the VAC course, but I use them in life. Its made me more aware of good communication: checking if people understood; looking them in the eye; thinking how you frame a meeting. Those skills are transferable.'*

10.2 None of those we spoke to had attended the course on self-employment organised by VAC with HMRC. They appeared to see it as an additional skill, a 'nice to have', rather than a career move. Opportunities to co-train with VAC had been limited and there was an awareness that with the programme coming to an end these would be fewer still.

10.3 Trustees who had not been selected as co-trainers were not entirely convinced that this was the right model: they wanted trainers who had practical experience of the issues discussed who could talk them through actual examples rather than just give them 'the theory'. To be fair, this was not a direct criticism of co-trainers specifically, but a more general concern about the quality of trainers and a strong desire for the course to be informed by 'real life' case studies.

## **11. Looking ahead**

11.1 All those we spoke to said, without hesitation, that they would recommend the course to others and many had already done so. There was unanimous agreement that such training should be available to trustees, strengthening leadership skills within organisations and across the sector. Indeed, it was suggested that this is needed now more than ever, because of the harsh environment in which these organisations are working. As one steering group member said:

*'The scene is changing and so are the skills needed. For example, community centres need to become more entrepreneurial. Organisations need to know where the money is coming from and how to diversify their funding base. Trustees need to manage change and recognize that new skills are needed.'*

11.2 While the financial climate is clearly a challenging one for many, trustees from small, unfunded organisations also recognized that they needed to develop their skills:

*'For a campaigning organisation like ours, we need to have good governance: clear roles, good practice etc make us less vulnerable to attack from outside.'*

*'Better governance equips, enables and prepares you to become a trustee. It shouldn't be stopped – we need the voluntary sector to be skilled up.'*

11.3 Although they were well aware of the need for the programme, participants were less sure about how it might be funded in future. Outlined below are alternative options discussed in the focus groups and interviews. We also assess how well this model fits in with a more market-oriented approach to training, with payments (or co-payments) from organisations; individual trustees; and/or funders, such as local authority commissioners or the Big Lottery Fund.

### *Fee-for-service model*

11.4 One option would be for VAC to charge for the training. Some said they would be willing to pay a 'reasonable' amount for this training (usually defined as less than £100), but all were concerned that people should not be excluded because of cost. It was pointed out that this programme had targeted small organisations with no paid staff or funding, who would struggle to pay for training. In most cases this would mean trustees would have to pay for themselves if they wanted to develop their skills, and it is possible that those who needed it most would be able to afford it least.

11.5 It is not clear from this evaluation whether the primary (or intended) beneficiary is the individual trustee or their organisation. Some of those we spoke to had changed organisations since they did the training, with their new board getting the benefit of the knowledge and skills gained on the course. This could put some organisations off investing in training for individual Board members, even though the local sector may be stronger as a result.

### *Full cost recovery option*

11.6 There was some support for the idea (put forward by members of the steering group) that good governance should be as much a priority for commissioners (and other funders) as it is for organisations themselves. They suggested that VAC should be lobbying the Council to include a training component for trustees as well as staff in all contracts, on a full cost recovery basis:

*'If organisations are to be at the top of their game and run well they need to have competent trustees. It would also send a message to other groups and those starting up.'*

*'In a broader public policy context, if organisations are not well run, public money gets wasted. Courses like this result in well run organisations and can help stop that waste.'*

11.7 This has the advantage of giving organisations money to pay for training, assuming that such costs can be predicted in advance and over the lifetime of a contract or contracts. Although a strong case can be made for this, it would of course again exclude many of the small, unfunded organisations which have clearly benefited from this programme. As importantly, it does not meet the needs of those who are struggling to understand the commissioning process and therefore are unable to get their foot on the ladder without some form of training.

### *A managed market?*

11.8 In recent years there has been much discussion about creating some kind of managed market for capacity building, whereby frontline organisations can access funding and choose from a range of providers (eg local and national infrastructure organisations or independent consultants) to buy the support they need. This was a recommendation from NCVO's Funding Commission and has also been taken up by the Big Lottery through programmes like Big Assist and its recent consultation on Building Capabilities. The aim is to give much greater choice and control to those frontline organisations.

11.9 The advantage of this model is that it would not restrict access to training to funded organisations, as potentially any voluntary or community organisation could apply for help to cover the costs of training or other forms of support. However, it is perhaps useful to

distinguish between one-to-one consultancy on a specific issue, such as a governance review or fundraising support, and on-going professional development for trustees or staff. Arguably there is already a market for one-off-support, albeit a limited one, but it is unclear whether this model is appropriate or effective for professional development, which may be seen as a matter of choice rather than one of need or priority. The question is how a general desire to upskill a sector is translated into practical action at an individual level. And how individuals know what support they need without the opportunity to develop their knowledge and skills.

#### *Other forms of support*

11.10 People wanted to be kept up-to-date with developments in the sector, preferably through further training, but, if not, through email updates; on-line discussion groups and / or networking events. There was a preference for face-to-face meetings - one of the things that people valued about the training was the opportunity to meet and share experiences with other trustees - but it was felt that this needed to be managed, so that it did not become a 'moan and groan group' and to ensure that people did not share the *wrong* information, as one person said:

*'Know-it-all people are very dangerous. They are confident and lecture everyone else, even when they are wrong.'*

11.11 It was suggested that getting the right balance could be achieved by:

- **Masterclasses**, held on a regular or ad hoc basis and linked to a networking event, providing an opportunity for trustees to learn from an 'expert' and to share experiences with other trustees.
- **Action learning sets**, enabling trustees to support each other, but in a very focused way with a facilitator.
- **Peer mentoring**, using appropriately trained peer mentors (this could build on the co-training model).

These options came up in almost all the focus groups and interviews in some form.

## **12. Conclusion**

12.1 This evaluation found that the training component of the Better Governance programme was highly valued by participants in terms of the course content; its pitch and pace; and the resources provided. More importantly, they could identify practical changes that had made a positive difference to their organisations as a result of attending the training. It is also clear that they continue to refer back to the information given, as and when they need to; some had also shared what they had learned with their fellow trustees. This suggests that the training went wider and deeper than it might initially appear.

12.2 The programme was deliberately designed to maximize participation from trustees, particularly from small organisations and BME community groups. It does appear to have been successful in this respect, partly because of the time and effort spent reaching out to these groups, but also because there was a clear willingness to respond to participants' needs and learn from experience. The project manager and steering group were instrumental in this. The challenge going forward will be how to build on this success and continue to support small, unfunded organisations in a more austere environment.

12.3 We have not been able to assess the impact of the one-to-one support: only two people said they had received this and both were from funded organisations, however they did say that it had been useful. Most of the people we spoke to were unaware that this was available to them, suggesting that there could perhaps have been a more systematic approach to follow up. It is also possible that the offer was made at the wrong time, before people were ready: they may have needed to do the training and start to put it into practice before they could identify their support needs.

12.4 The co-training element of the programme was enthusiastically reviewed by those who took part, all said it had helped to embed their knowledge and increase their confidence. It is hard to say what impact this will have on their career prospects at this stage, but it would be useful to do a further follow-up in 6 months or a years time to see how people are using these skills.

12.5 As well as assessing programme itself, this evaluation also highlights the key role that VAC plays within the local voluntary sector ecosystem. People chose to attend either because they already saw VAC as a valued source of advice when needed, or because the project had actively reached out to trustees who were not engaged and who would not otherwise have put themselves forward. This suggests that local relationships are important and local infrastructure organisations play a key role as a source of social capital as well as expertise. The training needs to be understood in this context, as part of an on-going process of strengthening and supporting the sector, rather than a one-off transaction with individuals or organisations.