

ACRE PEER REVIEW

FULL REPORT FOR BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COMMUNITY ACTION

1.0 Introduction

ACRE has established a Peer Review process under which trained reviewers verify whether an RCC has reached a pre-designated level of the relevant Standard. These standards contain a number of requirements that relate to good practice within an RCC.

This report sets out the findings of a Peer Review of Buckinghamshire Community Action carried out against Level 2 of the ACRE Standard.

The reviewers were Trevor Bevan [Norfolk Rural Community Council], Lead Reviewer and Bron Kerrigan [Cheshire Community Action] Support Reviewer. The review comprised two elements:

- A desktop review of documentary evidence submitted by Buckinghamshire Community Action.
- A site visit of 23rd/24th February 2009 during which three Trustees and nine members of staff were interviewed and further documentary evidence was examined.

Those interviewed during the site visit were:

Trustees: Mike Moore, Chairman of Board
Glyn Thomas, Honorary Treasurer
Tom Forster

Staff: Michael Hunt, Executive Director
Frances Northrop, Business Development Manager
Laurie Johnson, Funding Advice Officer/Company Secretary
Jean Fox, Rural Housing Enabler
Richard Maskell, Rural Transport Partnership Officer
Sarah Allwood, Community Projects Officer
Jon Leese, IVAN Project Worker
Bridget Grant, Administration Officer
Sally Hussey, Rural Transport Partnership Officer

The cooperation received from BCA in carrying out this review is gratefully acknowledged.

2.0 Overview of Implementation of the ACRE Quality Standard

Buckinghamshire Community Action was originally formed as Buckinghamshire Council for Voluntary Services in 1975, changing to its present name in June 1998 when it became the Rural Community Council for Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes.

BCA offers a wide range of services within the rural and urban areas of Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes with its work currently focusing around eight areas:

- Community led planning
- Community development projects
- Community building advice service
- Funding advice
- Rural housing
- Rural transport
- Mobile project
- Strategic influencing

BCA leases a property in Bierton on the outskirts of Aylesbury that provides adequate office facilities for the Executive Director and his nine staff, also a co-located organisation, Community Matters Bucks. Consideration should now be given to the accommodation needs of the additional five staff presently being recruited. As the premises do not fully satisfy the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1999, alternative facilities are sometimes utilised. Also a neighbours meeting room is available to facilitate Board and other meetings, conferences etc.

The organisation has experienced a difficult time in recent years suffering from long periods without a substantive Chief Executive. However the present part time Executive Director has made a considerable impact on the organisation by attracting much new work and additional funding streams, which have rebuilt the reputation of BCA since the Level 1 visit. This has resulted in a considerable expansion. The Peer Reviewers feel that there should now be a period of consolidation including strengthening the infrastructure of the organisation to provide the necessary support for the enlarged workforce. A further initiative has been to join the Voluntary Impact Bucks consortium that comprises BCA and three CVS organisations, with BCA being the largest partner.

The Board comprises eight Trustees, two of whom have been recent appointments although the majority have been in post less than three years.

Instances of good practice and also issues for consideration for improvement are described in detail within this report.

The reviewers consider that Buckinghamshire Community Action meet the requirements of the ACRE Standard at Level 2 for all nine areas of organisational management. This conclusion has been submitted to ACRE with a recommendation that they formally approve BCA to Level 2 of the ACRE Standard.

3.0 Detailed Findings

The following detailed findings are by reference to the nine headings of the ACRE Standard. They provide details of where the organisation is working well, as well as suggestions where improvements could be made.

3.1 Business Planning

Extensive work has been carried out by staff and trustees to fully review the Strategic Business Plan since their last Peer Review. Aims and objectives have been reviewed and in

some instances changed to reflect the future direction of the organisation. Outcomes are being defined for key services which link clearly to BCA's objectives.

Stakeholders are involved in strategic planning through membership of a partner board linked to a specific project; these boards meet quarterly and oversee the project. An annual stakeholder event is currently planned for 2009. Informal links between staff and stakeholders also help to underpin this standard.

Conclusion: Level 2 met.

3.2 User Centred Services

Feedback from service users has been obtained by a variety of methods including one to one response between staff and users, ongoing dialogue when considered necessary and a formal survey contained within the newsletter "In Focus". There are also numerous "project specific" surveys which inform both user and provider and which serve to improve service delivery. [Please see Peer Reviewers comment at Standard 6.2].

Complaints and comments from users are investigated and dealt with through the Complaints policy.

Conclusion: Level 2 met.

3.3 Trustees and the Board

The Board meets quarterly with a Finance and General Purposes Committee also meeting quarterly, usually a month or so apart. The Executive Director reports on performance at each meeting and takes the appropriate action on any recommendations made. Other senior staff will attend Board or Committee to address specific topics and/or particular issues. [Please see Peer Reviewers comments at issues for improvement].

Trustees promote the work of BCA externally. They represent the organisation on a number of appropriate local, regional and national bodies including LSPs. Financial matters are dealt with effectively by the F & GP Committee under the chairmanship of the Honorary Treasurer. The consideration of the fundraising strategy is considered as a part of the Business Development Plan that was recently ratified and will be a regular agenda item in future. A process of policy review has recently been introduced commencing in January and continuing thereafter.

The Board involves stakeholders in strategic planning through the annual stakeholders conference and the Annual General Meeting.

When vacancies arise within the board structure they have regard to geographical location and also professional skills. A matrix is used to identify any gaps in skills or knowledge. Positive recruitment recently resulted in the appointment of a Trustee from a location not previously covered, possessing HR skills that were needed within the Board. An advertisement for Chairman received no response and as such the present Chairman assumed the role on a temporary basis, but at this time still remains in post.

The Finance and General Purposes Committee has clear terms of reference agreed by the Board.

Conclusion: Level 2 met.

3.4 Managing Activities

Written procedures for each project/activity are in place that sit alongside work plans and are reviewed annually.

Effective internal communications are assured by Keep In Touch [KIT] meetings for all staff with agendered update contributions from everyone. There are very good formal communication streams including access to the Executive Director whose “open door” policy extends beyond those hours he works in a part time capacity. Also, the Peer Reviewers considered that the internal communication, support and team working between the project officers RHE/VHA/PP and RTPO are to be commended.

All staff are responsible for maintaining their records and these are either filed in cabinets or electronically, via the shared server.

Purchases for the organisation are made in line with the Purchasing Policy contained within the handbook that also contains the Environment Policy. BCA is developing a new initiative “Greening your Office” which is shortly to be introduced.

The annual review process of work plans enables the organisation to plan each project in advance, to evaluate needs and allocate resources. This is evidenced in the 2009/10 budget and also the business development plan.

Conclusion: Level 2 met.

3.5 Financial Management

BCA is fortunate to have three qualified persons looking after finance, namely the Finance Officer, Executive Director and also the Chairman. They conduct an operational cash flow system and financial projections are drawn up in the third quarter with the F & GP Committee given financial reports at each meeting.

The Reserves Policy that was recently reviewed and contingency measures for emergency expenditure are contained within the Handbook. There is an internal financial audit programme that includes risk assessment.

The Business Development Plan facilitates the funding strategy and includes planning for future financial resource allocation.

The reviewers consider that BCAs financial management organisation and processes are to be commended.

Conclusion: Level 2 met.

3.6 Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and Evaluation is undertaken in a structured manner with regular progress reports being made to the Board and/or its committee to ensure that trustees are aware of progress against objectives and targets that are adjusted as necessary to ensure a satisfactory outcome. This process is delivered through the Executive Director.

A new system “The CES Outcomes Programme” is in the course of introduction that the organisation believes will improve its performance against this particular standard. However the reviewers consider that at this stage, the form being used to gather and evaluate feedback is somewhat generic, and it is therefore suggested that a more detailed “project specific” document be produced to fully satisfy the criteria.

Project leads attend regional network meetings on a regular basis where good practice is shared with colleagues. Additionally research is undertaken to identify further good practice and ideas to enhance service delivery.

Performance against the Equal Opportunities Policy and procedures is monitored through recruitment data.

Conclusion: Level 2 met.

3.7 Managing and supporting staff

As previously recorded, KIT meetings are held monthly for all staff which include an agenda item on work updates from each member of staff. Minutes are taken of these meetings. There are also numerous informal meetings. Annual appraisals are held between line managers and staff to give mutual feedback on the previous year and to plan for the future year.

Work plan reviews incorporating an outcome indicator system ensure staff are given clear objectives for their work, the system is also used to assess performance.

Staff are effectively involved in annual and strategic planning through the annual work plan reviews and away days, also the monthly KIT meetings.

The Volunteer Policy is due for review and the reviewers consider this to be a priority in the light of BCAs intention to work more closely with Voluntary Impact Bucks and other organisations. The organisations response to expressions of interest from potential volunteers is evidenced through the submission of a case study.

Conclusion: Level 2 met.

3.8 Training and Skills Development

Person Specifications relating to each post at BCA identify the competences required of staff.

Each member of staff has an individual training record to document and plan their training needs that are identified through the annual appraisal. All staff interviewed expressed satisfaction with the training ethos of the organisation, stating that there was ample

opportunity to discuss their training needs at any time. Training undertaken is analysed to measure its effectiveness.

The reviewers considered that although training is taking place on an individual basis, the Standard requires an Organisational Training Plan to be provided which is overarching and identifies future organisational needs. It was however appreciated that this task had already been recognised by the Business Development Manager as requiring attention.

It was also noted that the issue of core training identified as a matter for attention by the Level 1 Peer Reviewers still needed to be addressed. The Business Development Manager also acknowledged this.

Examples were provided where staff have been encouraged to pursue relevant recognised qualifications.

Conclusion: Level 2 met,

3.9 Networks and Partnerships

BCA has a comprehensive range of publicity materials, including project flyers and a website. There is also a newsletter that is issued to members on a quarterly basis.

The Business Plan identifies an intention to look at rebranding to modernise the organisations image.

It was noted by the reviewers that some of the flyers contained “out of date” information that could reflect on BCAs image and therefore should be addressed.

Formal partnership agreements with key partners are reviewed as necessary. Best practice is identified through attendance at SERCC meetings and research nationally and within the wider voluntary and community sectors.

Details of all relevant local and national organisations are held on a database and are kept up to date.

Conclusion: Level 2 met.

4.0 Areas of Good Practice

The Peer Reviewers identified the following areas of good practice during their visit:

- The Rural Transport/Community Transport schemes provide an effective means of taking services out into the community. A range of vehicles from 16 to 69 seat capacity have provided 92 journeys in the past 12 months and 36 have already been organised so far this year. They cater for youth who are unable to access facilities within the county, also specialist vehicles for wheelchair users. Young carers are taken for days out as respite, also young offenders. Funding is also provided for community groups and community car schemes. A Wheels to Work project provides 15 mopeds and youth workers and connection officers have identified prospective users. There is also a good tool kit for Wheels to Work.

- BCA is to be commended for the succession planning it has put in place to ensure that the Rural Transport/Community Transport scheme does not suffer from the staff change taking place at the end of March on the retirement of the present Rural Transport Officer who has been the principal architect of this most successful service. He is undertaking a two-month handover with his successor including introductions to similar schemes in neighbouring counties to ensure a seamless transfer of responsibility.
- The IVAN project. One of five projects in the country this mobile outreach takes services out into the community. It came about through a bid to the National Lottery for Children and young persons and computers. With a target to reach 1,000 young people, IVAN provides a wide range of activities including arts and multimedia with animation/graphics being particularly popular. The van is equipped with eight computers thus there is a limit on numbers, although the team does carry out school visits when the equipment can be transferred and used to cater for larger groups of up to 25. The team also works with the Youth Service, Youth clubs, Parish Councils and District Councils. BCAs name is widely publicised as a result of the IVAN projects and the staff involved are to be congratulated.
- Web based community led planning network. Whilst utilising ACRE's Community Zero website, the Community Projects Officer has established a community led planning network online for parish plan groups with password protected access. She is using four schools to launch the project and hopes to link up with neighbouring counties and also regionally.
- Rural Housing enabling. This service has suffered considerable financial setbacks in many RCCs, but at BCA, primarily due to the efforts of the Rural Housing Enabler it appears to be on a very firm footing in Buckinghamshire. Initially, following the withdrawal of RSCP funding last year the service was supported by two district councils. A partnership agreement has now been established with four Housing Associations and LA funding from the Second Homes funding for the next three years that has ensured the service will continue. The RHE works very closely with the Village Halls Adviser and Parish Plan project workers and also has good links with the district councils.

4.1 Issues for Consideration for Improvement

A number of issues identified by the Level 1 Peer Reviewers as “observations for improvement” have been addressed although some still remain unresolved. The need for action is reinforced by the more stringent requirements of the Level 2 Standards. These are repeated here with additional observations of the Level 2 reviewers.

6.2 Monitoring and Evaluation.

Although the CES Outcomes Programme is being implemented with a system of evaluation form feedback from user groups and stakeholders, the form is somewhat generic and it is suggested that a more detailed ‘project specific’ document be produced to fully satisfy this criteria.

8.2 Organisational Training Plan

Although training is taking place on an individual basis, the Standard requires an Organisational Training Plan to be provided which is overarching and identifies future organisational needs.

Core Training

This issue was identified by the Level 1 Reviewers and is still outstanding.

Publicity leaflets

Although we appreciate the speed at which the organisation is developing and as such the need to prioritise workload, some leaflets and flyers still contain out of date information.

Support and Supervision

The present somewhat informal system of support and communication works well with experienced staff. However, with the recruitment of five additional members shortly to reinforce the organisation, there should be a more formalised line management and support mechanism. This will be particularly pertinent if closer collaboration with VIB occurs.

Policy Review

Although the policies were reviewed by the newly appointed Executive Director at the beginning of 2008, they are now due for further review and it is suggested that a rolling programme be introduced for presentation to the Board for approval.

Volunteers

The policy relating to the recruitment and use of volunteers is identified as being due for review in January 2009. This has not been evidenced and the Peer Reviewers consider that this will be particularly important in the event that increased working with VIB occurs.

Internal Organisational Communications

The existing system for communicating information from Staff to Trustees and Trustees to Staff is channelled primarily through the Executive Director. With the enlarged organisation we consider that this conduit should be enhanced to ensure that the whole organisation is kept fully informed.

5.0 What needs to happen now?

Having verified Buckinghamshire Community Action currently meets Level 2 of the ACRE Quality Standards; it should now assess its performance against Level 3 as a guide to improving the quality of the way the organisation manages its activities.

Report submitted by: Trevor Bevan – Lead Reviewer]

Dated:

N.B. This report is based on the evidence that was presented to the Peer Reviewers at the time of the review.