

Position Statement on the Value and Needs of Small Community Groups

A description of a small community group in Brighton and Hove

Small, community based groups are founded and organised around activities that the members themselves have decided are important. These groups can have no paid staff and are often run by fewer than 10 core volunteers, although activities can be supported by many more. Often unfunded, these groups form the front line of a community and voluntary sector whose work benefits everyone in the city. They play a vital role in resilience of the city's communities through innovative and creative approaches to what is important to them.

The Resource Centre, a sector support organisation, estimates that there are well over 700 small groups in the city¹ making up a large proportion of the community and voluntary sector locally. Community Works has 214 small groups in its membership (see Appendix 1 on page 6).

Small groups characteristically have a very open and informal structure. The management of the group and its activities are generally carried out by the same people and the existence of the group is often entirely dependent on the voluntary commitment of these core people. The producers and the consumers of the group's activity are often the same people.

It is acknowledged that it is hard to define small groups and it can be unhelpful to put boundaries around what they do because groups may change structure as they develop. Nationally, there is no consistent definition, although groups can be described as 'informal', 'unregulated' and 'below the radar'. To try to help our understanding and illustrate the size of organisation being talked about, the descriptions in the table below have been put together based on local knowledge:

Group	Annual Income	Description
Embryonic	£0	informal, a few people meeting, might not recognise themselves as a 'group'
Micro	£0-£5,000*	likely to have more formal structures (e.g. a set of rules, management committee)
Small	£5,000-£35,000	likely to have a constitution, management committee and bank account and regular volunteers. Likely to be an Unincorporated Association

*when an organisation has an annual income over £5,000 they are advised to register with the Charities Commission, if their aims are within the legal definition of charitable.

A report by the Manchester Metropolitan University 'Surviving, Thriving or Dying' June 2012² shows that small community groups are more resilient and likely to survive in these times of austerity: "the groups who are most resilient and likely to survive are those who are involved in self-help, rely on their own volunteers and have their own income. In the main, these are groups who have incomes less than £10,000 per annum".

¹ Resource Centre [User Satisfaction Survey November 2010](#)

² http://www.ioe.mmu.ac.uk/caec/docs/5752_ESRC-CAEC%20Project_Summary%20Report.pdf

Why a small groups position statement?

This position statement was created to highlight what is meant by the term small community group, to create an appreciation that the informality and gradual nature in the way that they grow is essential in addressing community need and to highlight that there are things that could be put in place to help groups build resilience and continue to contribute to the well-being and vibrancy of the communities that make up this city.

10 things that small groups do well

1. **Empowerment** – the way that small groups are structured, operate and engage with people naturally means that individuals and communities are strengthened and empowered.
2. **Knowing Community Need** – small groups often work with vulnerable people within the most deprived communities. This might be in a particular neighbourhood or with a group of people with a common identity or interest. Small groups are created and led by the people from those communities so they are well placed to advocate on their behalf and decide on projects to address a particular need.
3. **Creativity and Innovation** – small groups have energy, momentum and enthusiasm. They are not tied to bureaucratic processes and have the freedom to be innovative.
4. **Resilience** – groups adapt and change according to what people need and the resources available to them. They are self-sufficient and resilient.
5. **Volunteers** – groups are made up of volunteers who dedicate their time to providing free services to our communities.
6. **Skills and Experience** – these volunteers bring a huge wealth and variety of skills and experience and are experts in knowing their communities and seeing opportunities to support and develop them.
7. **Promotion and Communication** - groups are good at promoting themselves and recognising when it is important to be visible in the city. On the other hand they make and maintain a dialogue within their own communities, reducing social isolation.
8. **Independence** – small groups are able to stick to their core values and aims because they don't have funding which can pull them away from their particular specialism and vision.
9. **Fundraising** – small groups apply for funding from trusts and grant making bodies but can also be creative in their fundraising. They tend to rely on community events and donations from individuals more than larger organisations.
10. **Activities** – small groups are experts in their field, from running campaigns, organising social activities and community festivals, improving their local area to providing advice. There is no end to the activities that take place.

What Small Groups Need: Recommendations for Action

Both public bodies and sector support organisations have opportunities to support the resilience of small community groups. Below are the set of recommendations identified from the process of developing this position statement:

- 1. Recognition and Respect of Community Based Interventions**
- 2. Protection of Small Grants for the very smallest groups**
- 3. Help to Measure Outcomes**
- 4. Improved Two-way Communication with Public Bodies**
- 5. Support to Manage Volunteers**

1. Recognition and Respect of Community Based Interventions

- It would be helpful to have a wider and greater recognition of the work that small community groups undertake and the significant outcomes achieved, in highly cost effective ways. A central place to record information about impact and improved communication with public bodies would help with this (see 3 and 4 below).
- When public bodies and support organisations respect the informal and gradual nature of groups, they understand that a group might want to stay small and not be required to grow larger. It is normal for people to dip in and out of a group and this contributes to their resilience. Being small means groups are better able to keep in touch with their members and to concentrate on what has brought them together.

2. Protection of Small Grants for the very smallest groups

- Small grants are at the heart of the resilience of small community groups. It is essential that the future availability of these is secured to enable continuation of their services.
- In addition, ring fencing grant pots for small groups means that as competition for funding increases, larger organisations cannot access them at the expense of smaller organisations.
- There is a need for a guarantor service for small groups who are not registered with the Charities Commission but need someone to give assurance to funders when applying for grants.
- It is desirable that the funding that was available for health related groups across the city and in specific neighbourhoods (the Can Do Health and Healthy Neighbourhoods Fund administered by People Can, from Public Health) continues to be available to support small groups and their grass roots projects and that this continues to be managed by an organisation in the community and voluntary sector.
- Better communication is needed from public bodies such as the NHS and the council so that small groups can stay up to date with changes in commissioning structures and take advantage of any funding opportunities arising.

3. Help to Measure Outcomes

- Outcomes and outputs measurement and the requirement to show value for money should be **proportionate** to the funding given.
- The city would benefit from a central place for collecting the outcomes achieved by small groups to help raise awareness of community based interventions and the impact of communities being empowered in this way. This could then feed into statutory services, local policy & decision makers to help raise awareness and a general appreciation that this approach to delivering services is empowering and sustainable.
- Funders could change the way that they ask for monitoring and evaluation, i.e. on a flexible outcomes based approach. More uniformity across funders would be helpful (a standard reporting format) and joined up thinking about the kinds of reports and data required.
- Funders and support agencies could provide more relevant and appropriate information and training for groups wanting to measure their impact. This should include support for groups to measure their impact in the most appropriate way, ensuring that service users are at the heart of this. For more information, see the People Can Community Service agreement Project on Measuring Impact.

4. Improved Two-way Communication with Public Bodies

- A theme running throughout the points above, is improving two-way communication and focussed support; raising awareness of how and what small groups contribute to the city. This would greatly improve the resilience of groups.

5. Support to Manage Volunteers

- The strength of small groups is their volunteers. However, often groups do not have time to recruit and manage volunteers as well as running the group and its activities. Managing volunteers is a particular skill, with health and safety implications needing to be considered. More information accessible to small groups is needed about how to support volunteers, with perhaps a training course to back this up. Another solution could be a volunteer coordinator for volunteers across the city.

Specific support needs of small groups

- Group development/transition – support needed around taking on a paid worker
- Sources of funding and support to make funding applications
- Cheap and accessible venues are vital for group's survival
- Low cost access to practical equipment for events
- Shared learning about how to increase involvement and reduce barriers to people participating
- Support with using all types of media to communicate with people in relevant communities (including social media, printed materials and mass media)
- Support to develop good governance techniques
- Affordable and accessible transport, many groups find that the high cost of bus fares is a basic barrier for people who wish to attend their activities.
- Free training and follow-up support

Support to Our Neighbourhoods

The following are a set of statements taken from the Neighbourhoods Manifesto (July 2005) which is a declaration of neighbourhood priorities gathered together by the Trust for Developing Communities (a sector support organisation). It is important to link with and highlight neighbourhood priorities so they are not forgotten:

- Community Newsletter in every area, to include: local skills directory and a directory of local groups and services
- Good practice and information sharing across neighbourhoods
- A community building in every neighbourhood; run by local residents and core costs provided by council against agreed long term lease
- Increased use of current and closed community premises e.g. using schools during holiday times and converting disused buildings
- Local, accessible training, learning and employment services; including community IT facilities with neighbourhood websites available to all.

How this statement was developed

Particular thanks to the People Can Community Service Agreement project participants whose idea and initial work kick started this position statement in August 2012:

Active Lightworks	Sing for Better Health
Clickers Community Photography Group	Sussex Endometriosis Support Group
Lunch Positive	Synergy Creative Community

Also thanks to those groups who attended the 29 November 2012 CVSF Small Community Groups Network who took part in an exercise to develop the position statement further:

B&H Muslim Women (BHMW)	Safety Net
Drama For Fun	Sussex Coast Endometriosis Support Group
Jesus Fellowship Church (Brighton)	The Round Hill Society
Metamorphosis Art Group	Triangle Community Group
Moulsecoomb Forum	Working 50 Plus

Information for the statement was also taken from information gathered from the first CVSF Small Community Groups Network in July 2011 and from comments sent in via the CVSF small groups' e-list.

Also thanks to the Resource Centre who provided information³ and an expert eye.

Position statements are living documents that evolve and change as local issues and priorities develop.

³ <http://www.resourcecentre.org.uk/about/RCBusinessPlan2013-16.pdf>

Appendix 1 – Small Groups in Community Works' Membership

A Band of Brothers	Brighton School of Singing
Action for Bevendean Community	Brighton Society
Action for Happiness in Brighton	Brighton Soup Run
Active LightWorks	Brighton Voluntary Group Diabetes UK
Active Student	Brunswick & Regency Neighbourhood Action Group
Actually C.I.C.	Brunswick Community Festival
ALALA (All for Love and Love for All)	Brunswick Westward U3A
Alzheimer's Society, Brighton & Hove Branch	Bus Users UK - Central Sussex Group
Another London Road	Churches Together in Brighton & Hove
Artist(e)	City in Bloom
Association of Harbour Communities	City Synergy
B&H & District Leaseholders Association	Clare Project
B&H & District Schools Rugby Association	Clifton, Montpelier, Powis Community Alliance LAT
B&H Archaeological Society	Community Development Organisation-Sussex
B&H Arts Council	Community Support Drop-in
B&H Black History	Craven Vale Community Association
B&H Black Women's Group	Crohns and Colitis UK
B&H Friends of the Earth	Cultivate
B&H Independent Mediation Service	Ditchling Museum
B&H Interfaith Contact Group	Ditchling Rise Area Residents Association
B&H Jewish Representative Council	Djambass Music
B&H Muslim Women (BHMW)	Downs Baptist Church
B&H Older People's Council	Drama For Fun
B&H World Development Movement	Duke of Edinburgh's Award
BD4U - Eastern Promise	Dupont Art Club
Be Crafty	Earthy Women and Kids
Benfield Wildlife and Conservation Group	Easthill Park Group
Bevendean Community Garden	Engage
Bevendean Local Action Team	Epilepsy Action Brighton and Hove Branch
Bike Train Project	Exploring Senses CIC
Bricycles	Firefly Workshops CIC
Bright Exchange	Five Mountains
Brighton & Hove Association of Gambian Citizens	Fork and Dig it
Brighton & Hove Eco Energy	Forward Facing
Brighton & Hove Women Against The Cuts	Friends of Bedford Square
Brighton and Hove Community Radio	Friends of Bevfest
Brighton and Hove Energy Services	Friends of Blaker's Park
Brighton and Hove's Wildlife Forum	Friends of Brunswick Square & Terrace
Brighton Breastfeed Drop-in	Friends of Hollingbury and Burstead Woods
Brighton Carnival Association	Friends of Hove Stroke Club

Brighton Conservation Volunteers	Friends of Preston Park
Brighton Dolphin Swimming Club	Friends of Saunders Park
Friends of St Ann's Well Gardens	Magpie Environmental Trust
Friends of the Pepperpot	mASCot
Friends of The Three Cornered Copse	Meadowview Pre-School
Friends of William Clarke Park	Mediterranean Resources Network
FTM Brighton	Men Get Eating Disorders Too
GEMS (Gay Elderly Men's Society)	Metamorphosis Art Group
Girlguiding - Brighton East Division	Millwood Kicks Club
Girlguiding - Brighton West Division	Mixed Blessings Theatre Group
Gladrags Community Costume Resource	Montessori Free School
Glass Bridges	Morning Glory
GreenCycleSussex	Moulsecomb Community Forum and Newsletter
Grow Community Group	Multiple Sclerosis Society - Brighton, Hove & District Branch
Guinea group (Guinness Estate Association Whitehawk)	Music for Kids
Gujarati Cultural Society	National Osteoporosis Society, B&H Group
Hangleton Band	North Laine Community Association
Hanover Action for Sustainable Living	North Portslade Community Allotment Group
Helping Kenya	North Portslade Community Newspaper
Hollingbury Table Tennis Club	Outburst
Hollingdean Community Centre	People Who Share
Hollingdean Development Trust	Plot 22
Hollingdean News	Poets Corner Community Society
Homeopathy in the Sussex Community	Portslade Youth Forum
Hove Civic Society	Project V - University of Sussex
Hove Naturally	Purple Dot CIC
Inner City Wildlife Concern B&H area	QueenSpark Books
Ishigaki Ju-Jitsu	Quest Brighton and Sussex
IT Skills 4 Rural Kenya	Radio Free Brighton
Jesus Fellowship Church (Brighton)	RadioReverb Ltd
Kebbell Lodge & High Street Residents Association	Remap (Brighton & Hove District)
Kemp Town Carnival Association	Rethink
Kemp Town in Bloom	Rwandan Youth Information Community Organisation
Knoll Advice Centre	Serendipity Enterprising Solutions CIC
Knoll Community Association	Sierra Leone Brighton Association
Lapidus (Brighton branch)	Silver Sounds
Leading the Change	Sing for Better Health
Lewes Road for Clean Air	Soteria Brighton
Livestock (Mothers Uncovered)	South East Forum for Sustainability
London Road Area LAT	Special Branch Tree Nursery
London Road Station Partnership	Spiders Web IT
Lunch Positive	SPIN (Single Parent Information Network)

Lymerearchuk	St James' Area LAT
Macular Disease Society	St Nicholas Green Space Association SNGSA
St Philip's Community Social Club	The Circus Project
Stanmer & Coldean Local Action Team	The Friends of Palmeira & Adelaide
Starlings Housing Co-Op	The GOAL Group
Stay Up Late	The Good Life For All CIC
Strike a Light Community Arts and Heritage	The Kanji Project
Sudanese & Arabic Speaking Elderly Association	The Link Up Project
Sudanese Community in Sussex	The Massage in Schools Programme
Sudanese Women and Children	The Men's Network
Sussex Aphasia Self Help (SASH)	The Round Hill Society
Sussex Association for Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus	TheHallGetInvolved Ltd
Sussex Clubs for Young People	Trailer Trashed
Sussex Coast Endometriosis Support Group	Triangle Community Group
Sussex County Playing Fields Association	United Nations Association Brighton, Hove & District
Sussex Kurdish Community	Us-you.me
Sussex ME/CFS Society	Vallance Community Centre
Sussex Nightstop Plus	Victim Support Brighton
Sussex Palestinian Community	WE3 Presents
Sussex Polish Women's Group	West Hove Forum
Sussex Russian Centre Kalinka	Women's International League for Peace and Freedom
Sustrans Brighton Area Volunteers Group	Working 50 Plus
Sylvan Hall Residents Association	Youth Action Sussex
The Boys Brigade - 9th Brighton Group	Zhoosh LGBTQ Community Network
The Circle of Experienced Elders	Zippy Wheelchair Services

If your group is interested in becoming a member of Community Works please call the office on 01273 234023 or email info@bhcommunityworks.org.uk for a membership form. For more information about what we do you can visit: bhcommunityworks.org.uk.