

Social Action Fund: all target, no aim.....

Last Friday, 2 February 2012, time was called on applications to the Government's Social Action Fund. Branded on its prospectus as "...funding big ideas, inspiring social action" some thought maybe, just maybe, this might offer some welcome support to authentic local voluntary action. But Adrian Barritt of Adur Voluntary Action discovered it was a missed and misguided opportunity. Here's why....

In the ceaseless quest for funding I had a good look at the Social Action Fund, and so did colleagues in other local CVSs running volunteering services, in case we could get together and meet the terms, within the deadline. We drew blanks, individually and collectively. This is why.

Barbed wire fence of conditions

Just take a look at the conditions fencing this one in, and you'll twig that it's not aimed at small local voluntary action organisations, even if they are playing the obligatory partnership tune.

- A minimum of £100,000 (there is no maximum – sic) must be spent over eighteen months
- Only eighteen months allowed to make a significant and sustainable impact on volunteering, social and community action rates of engagement
- No on-going support for groups or people when funding ends
- Projects must be scalable upwards. More or less essential to have such a project ready and waiting.
- Monitoring demands require a crystal ball unless the project is already running
- Lack of available match funding handicaps an application
- Projects must draw all funds by March 2013 and spend all by September 2013

Competition winners will :

- Possess the greatest match funding
- Propose projects which result in the greatest increase in volunteering
- Result in the greatest enduring impact within pre-defined themes
- Are large-scale or include plans to "scale up"

And for the record, the pre-defined "themes" offer a choice between:

1. Local models which can be scaled-up or replicated, but which use people who are not traditionally volunteers

OR

2. Generate "social action" from a specific group that can be scaled-up nationally

Finally, who's eligible to apply. Here we go:

- Organisations that have a track record of delivering social action programmes
- Constituted civil society organisations – even unincorporated ones whose members are prepared to commit personally to controlling effective expenditure of at least £100,000 of government money within eighteen months

- Public sector bodies such as hospital trusts, schools, universities (local authorities?)
- Has been in operation for two years and can provide two years of audited accounts
- Shows income of over £100,000 in the most recent set of accounts
- Be able to accept a grant offer by 8 March 2012 “There will be a very tight turnaround for this information and you are advised to build this in to your project planning”
- Confirm that a grant would not break EU state aid rules

Desperate, of Big Society?

Can readers detect the notes of desperation that are beginning to creep in? For this offering sets almost everyone against everyone, in a madcap scramble to find a model of generating sufficient national spread of “social action” to lend credibility to the Big Society and Localism myths. The speed of rolling out, short time scale for spending awards, high minimum amount of individual awards, highly quantitative monitoring conditions, absence of any reputable evaluation framework, all point to three latent functions:

- A party political purpose, aimed at being able to demonstrate investment in voluntary action prior to an election
- A desperation to show that, with enough effort, sufficient volunteers can jump like Jason’s armed warriors from the soil, to replace our vanishing public sector services and provide a rationale for destruction of still more
- An intention to fund only large-scale initiatives which will deliver on government policy, generating models of voluntary action which will permit further cuts in established services provided by the local public sector. The audience should be advised, whilst listening to the localism mood music, to follow the centralisation cash-flow.

A recipe for local social inaction?

Look! There’s my own half-completed handwritten application form for the Social Action Fund still lying on the desk! Seems I reached question three before realising that this was nothing like what Adur Voluntary Action really needs, in order to stimulate social action amongst our communities. It’s time now to think through the logical reasons accompanying an acknowledged emotional response.

Firstly, we don’t need £100,000. Such a waste of money! Something like the £10,000 p.a cost of a part-time development worker for five years will be fine, total £50,000

Secondly, we can’t deliver within eighteen months. Community development is not like that. Our communities are developing, but at their own rates. Our working relationships are with those who come out of the woodwork bringing ideas, and gradually, one fertilises another. Until suddenly you realise there has been a step-change.

Thirdly, voluntary means ...voluntary. This in turn means unpredictable and requiring sensitive nurture. AVA is working to offer that sensitive nurturing, and for us, this is not in harmony with a rush to meet government targets. Our intention is real change, and sustainability of community action in Adur regardless of government policies.

Fourthly, we don’t intend to launch projects that will drop people in fresh air when they end, or leave ourselves with another fund raising challenge.

Fifthly, being true localists, we do not believe in scaling-up. We believe that in the world of local voluntary action, everywhere is different, operating to different timescales, patterns of local history, strengths and handicaps. Often it even boils down to personalities. In short, to seek the magic bullet as the Social Action Fund does is both misguided and malevolent. It's equivalent to those philosophers or scientists who seek the grand theory of everything.

Sixthly, AVA is too small and not in with a chance. We can't find the matching money. We don't have a project we would offer up for scaling. We can't handle the monitoring requirements. We would never, with any integrity, guarantee outcomes in the kinds of terms that are required. In short, though "losers" in terms of this particular offering, we and many other groups are the authentic messy world of local voluntary action.

Seventhly, charities are not permitted to pursue party political causes. It is becoming increasingly clear that policies associated with the Big Society and Localism embody major party political ideologies intended fundamentally to alter the nature of our society. Many in the voluntary sector object to being used as party political pawns to help politicians justify misconceived, failed or un-evaluated policies, which are diminishing the life chances of vulnerable local people, and putting public sector colleagues out of work.

Either offer something genuinely useful, or simply get off our backs.

Adrian Barritt
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