



Evaluation of the South Yorkshire Social Infrastructure Programme

Report F: Core Infrastructure Services

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The South Yorkshire Social Infrastructure Programme (SYSIP) invested in an array of core infrastructure services. We have used this term to cover the services provided by the four district wide local infrastructure organisations in South Yorkshire (Voluntary Actions Barnsley, Rotherham and Sheffield and Doncaster Council for Voluntary Service) as well as the South Yorkshire Funding Advice Bureau.

The SYSIP evaluation ran from 2007-2009. This is one of a series of reports produced. Others are on other themes of voluntary and community sector infrastructure (e.g. volunteering support) or cross-cutting, for example a review of policy.

Key messages

The following key messages can be drawn from this study:

- **Aim:** One of the common questions in SYSIP concerns the sustainability of the VCS: *to what extent and how are organisations supported by SYSIP funded core infrastructure services stronger (more sustainable or resilient) as a result?* This question was explored through interviews with thirteen case study organisations.
- **Context:** Based on the development of a 'support needs index', existing data suggests that very few organisations report lots of severe problems, and many report only slight problems. The main issues regarded as problems for the sector are 'raising funds', 'finding and recruiting new volunteers' and 'getting new members and users involved in your group'. Across South Yorkshire organisations with staff tend to report more severe problems than those without staff.
- **Support funded through SYSIP:** included community accountancy and payroll services, funding information and advice, human resources and legal support, training and support for organisational development, procurement and commissioning.
- **Support needs:** The kinds of issues facing the case study organisations include the need for information, advice and support around *specialist technical or professional services*; issues around *funding and finance*, including concerns and needs associated with the changing funding environment, such as income generation and commissioning and procurement; and broader issues of *organisational development*, regarded as part of a process of becoming more strategic and professional.
- **Accessing support:** The case study organisations were already very well connected with local voluntary sector support agencies, and had used them regularly in the past. Many were proactive in pursuit of support, particularly training opportunities. A striking feature of the case study organisations is the sheer range of different support services they have accessed.
- **The impact of support:** Overwhelmingly the case study organisations were positive about the support they had accessed and the difference this is thought to have made. A conclusive and authoritative judgement about whether the case study organisations are *actually* more sustainable and resilient is likely, however, to require a longer term

assessment. Interviewees clearly think their organisations are stronger and more sustainable, through a combination of:

- i. developing more appropriate and better structures, systems, policies and procedures to support their work
- ii. adopting a more strategic, planned, professional, forward-looking and networked outlook
- iii. becoming more aware, knowledgeable and skilled about their 'operating environment', that is, the changing funding and policy context in which they work.

The perspectives of case study organisations might form a provisional proxy for the impact of support services funded through SYSIP. The perceived impacts provide good reasons to expect the case study organisations to be more sustainable.

Recommendations

The report does not draw simple straightforward policy recommendations. It highlights that it is too soon to form judgements around the sustainability of the sector - these issues can only be judged over a longer term. Those organisations participating in the research were largely positive about the report received, but by definition they were 'in the loop' and also tended to have greater support needs than the wider sector. Nonetheless, the continuing development of methodologies to **help infrastructure organisations demonstrate impact is likely to rise in importance.**

The support from core infrastructure is often relatively small, although many organisations participating in the research valued this highly, and found it necessary for their existence (e.g. around charity accounting or governance advice). **A debate for the sector and policy makers, in the context of public expenditure constraint, is around the future role of infrastructure and the extent to which support and capacity building should be targeted.** The evidence presented here suggests that this is not a simple trade-off and a more subtle debate is required.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background to SYSIP

The South Yorkshire Social Infrastructure Programme (SYSIP) was supported by Yorkshire Forward, the South Yorkshire Objective 1 Programme and the South Yorkshire Learning and Skills Council which committed investment funds of around £36.8 million (with £24.1 million from Yorkshire Forward, £11.6 million from the South Yorkshire Objective 1 Programme and £1 million from the Learning and Skills Council) to voluntary and community sector infrastructure organisations in South Yorkshire between 2006 and 2009. This funding has now ended. A key aim of the programme was to increase the sustainability of the organisations supported.

Examples of the work funded by SYSIP which are considered here include:

- Community Accountancy and Payroll Services (Doncaster, Rotherham and Sheffield)
- Funding Information and Advice (Doncaster and Sheffield)
- Human Resources and Legal Support (Rotherham and Sheffield)
- Organisational Support - Organisational Development (Barnsley), Business Planning (Doncaster), Small Groups Business Development (Rotherham) and Small Groups support (Sheffield)
- Quality Project (Sheffield)
- Procurement and Commissioning (Doncaster, Rotherham and Sheffield)
- Training (Sheffield).

An underpinning rationale for funding these areas of activity is that they seek to increase the sustainability of the voluntary and community sector - in terms of income, as organisations and in terms of the services they may offer.

1.2. Scope of the Evaluation

This is one of a series of reports produced on the different themes of SYSIP. These theme reports include:

- investment in volunteering
- acquisition and utilisation of assets
- core infrastructure services (this report)
- Academy for Community Infrastructure
- neighbourhood infrastructure
- partnership: voice, engagement and influence.

This research report focuses on the following question: *to what extent and how are organisations supported by SYSIP-funded core infrastructure services stronger (more sustainable or resilient) as a result?*

The report focuses on addressing a series of **thematic** and **core questions**. These are outlined below.

Evaluation Questions	
<p><i>Thematic</i> Who benefits from infrastructure support – what are the characteristics of different groups and how do they access support? What are their needs and are these met by the services offered? What is the impact of support in terms of organisational development? Where is there greatest demand for services and why? Are some models more effective than others?</p>	<p><i>Core</i> Have projects met their contracted output and outcome targets? What impact has the project had on the development of VCS organisations? What is the net social and economic impact? What is the strategic added value of the project? How has the project met the needs of hard to reach groups? How sustainable are the activities supported? Is there evidence of good practice? What recommendations for future programmes can be made?</p>

1.3. Structure

The report is structured around the following sections:

- Section 2: About SYSIP and its Evaluation
- Section 3: Policy Developments in Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure
- Section 4: Methodology
- Section 5: Case Study Findings
- Section 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

2. About SYSIP and the Evaluation

2.1. Introduction

The **aim of SYSIP** is to increase the sustainability of the voluntary and community sector (VCS) in South Yorkshire through support to infrastructure organisations. Through helping frontline VCS organisations become more effective, this is intended to bring wider economic and social impacts. The programme consists of six elements, each with complementary aims:

1. Barnsley Community Infrastructure
2. Doncaster Social Infrastructure
3. Rotherham Social Infrastructure
4. Sheffield Community Infrastructure
5. Sheffield Community Action Plan Programme
6. Academy for Community Leadership.

The programme was **evaluated** by researchers at Sheffield Hallam University, working in partnership with consultants mtl and COGS, in order to:

- estimate the impacts of the activities over time on VCS infrastructure and the economic regeneration of South Yorkshire
- help build monitoring and evaluation capacity in South Yorkshire
- capture learning and inform future action during the course of the programme.

The evaluation ran in three phases from **March 2007 to June 2009** and involved:

- reviewing the context, development and delivery of the programme
- assessing the impacts of the programme on the development of VCS organisations in South Yorkshire
- considering whether the programme is effectively meeting the needs of VCS organisations - particularly those from 'hard to reach' groups
- identifying good practice developed by the programme and individual elements
- assessing the sustainability of activities developed by the programme
- making recommendations for the future development of social and community infrastructure building programmes.

2.2. Rationale for SYSIP

The core costs of the SYSIP projects were met by Yorkshire Forward, South Yorkshire Objective 1 Programme, and the Learning and Skills Council. The investment in the SYSIP projects was made jointly by these organisations and funding from each (largely) runs concurrently.

The funding provided was in a range of voluntary and community sector 'infrastructure' activities and associated projects. Investment in VCS 'infrastructure' has been part of economic development programmes in the region since 1995 (as part of the EU Objective 2 programmes and linked SRB programmes of this period). Investment under the South Yorkshire Objective 1 programme extended investment, by seeking to invest funds more equitably in deprived neighbourhoods, through the support of communities of interest (e.g. organisations working with black and minority ethnic groups, and people with disabilities), as well as support to district and sub-regional level infrastructure organisations (e.g. local infrastructure organisations such as Councils for Voluntary Service - CVSs and to groups such as the AfCL and the South Yorkshire Open Forum).

Funding under SYSIP was made at a time when VCS organisations faced a reported 'funding cliff edge' with significant declines in UK and EU regional and regeneration funding going to VCS organisations. The **rationale** for SYSIP was therefore very much to provide support for a transitional period which allowed VCS infrastructure to be supported at an appropriate scale (for the funding available) and to seek sustainability without EU Structural Funds and SRB funding. Such sustainability it is suggested would be through VCS organisations attracting funding locally through new commissioning and procurement opportunities, through charging for services, and in some cases reconfiguring the scale/scope of organisations, through for example merger.

Under BERR (now BIS) evaluation guidance, RDAs may intervene for the following rationales: market failure (including provision of public goods, externalities, imperfect information and market power) and equity. The SYSIP projects can be seen to address these in different ways:

- *equity*: this is the main rationale for the SYSIP investments - namely that the RDA investment helps to reduce disparities between areas or different groups. Measures of the performance of SYSIP should therefore be derived from this
- *market failure*: investment in VCS organisations working in deprived areas and with disadvantaged groups can be seen to be seeking to address myriad market failures. Under the BERR framework, investment in VCS infrastructure does contain public good elements (e.g. advice and guidance available to all residents of a community) and externalities (e.g. neighbourhood effects from increasing employment or wellbeing)
- *investment in volunteer centres*: the interventions of the RDA have been to establish/continue support for volunteer centres. The work of the volunteer centres has primarily been in disadvantaged communities or hard to reach groups (including workless individuals). The justification for support here is therefore very much on *equity* grounds
- *acquisition and utilisation of assets*: this theme covers asset management and purchase physical assets (buildings). The rationale for RDA intervention includes *equity* arguments (e.g. for asset management), but also seeks to address perceived market barriers faced by VCS organisations (for example in bringing together a critical mass of infrastructure activities in one place), and therefore address issues of *market power* and *imperfect information*
- *core infrastructure services*: these are primarily justified on *equity* and *public goods* grounds
- *neighbourhood infrastructure*: these are primarily justified on equity grounds through increasing resources going to disadvantaged neighbourhoods and the focus on stimulating economic related activities

- *partnership*: this was seen as a cross-cutting theme and could be justified on *public goods* grounds.

These issues are considered further in the thematic sections and more extensively in the section on impact.

2.3. Undertaking the Evaluation

The evaluation proceeded in three phases in 2007, 2008 and 2009 respectively. The research in 2007 focused on the development of an evaluation framework, interviewing stakeholders and an initial review of data. The research in 2008 undertook to complete the substantive research tasks around five separate themes and to run a programme of masterclasses. The research in 2009 focused on the primary fieldwork around core infrastructure services, an extensive round of stakeholder interviews, analysis of final monitoring data, and analysis of an array of other data sources (notably the NSTSO and financial account data). Judgements to inform the estimate of impact have also been made.

3. Policy Developments in Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure

1. 3.1 Introduction - towards sustainability?

In the last ten years or so, the sustainability of the voluntary and community sector has become much more of a policy and practical concern, running partly in parallel with central government's growing interest in the current and potential role of the sector in delivering public services (HM Treasury/Cabinet Office 2007). A recent overview of finance issues in the sector notes that demand for funds from all sources is likely to remain high, competition will intensify, and there will be *"increased pressure (on funders and on fund-seekers) to make every penny work harder, to encourage ingenuity in financing work, to demonstrate efficiency and cost effectiveness, to share or pool resources and efforts"* (Carrington 2005: 110).

Responding to these concerns, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) launched a Funding Commission in February 2009 to examine the uncertain future of sector funding over the next ten years and to consider the opportunities and challenges around funding¹. In South Yorkshire, the debate has focused on the impact of the apparent funding 'cliff edge' represented by the loss of major regeneration funding streams. Echoing findings in other northern regions, Shutt and Kumi-Ampofo (2005) estimate that for Yorkshire and the Humber as a whole through to 2008-09 this loss may be up to £54 million. Given the scale of Objective 1 funding South Yorkshire was expected to be particularly adversely affected.

This concern was also emphasised by respondents in the 2006 review of 'lessons learnt' from Objective 1: *Much of the conversation with the profiled organisations centred on funding issues and in particular, how to maintain service provision once the cycle of SRB and Objective 1 streams have expired...* (Burnby 2006: 21). The report continues: *All the interviewees understood and talked about the need for long term strategic planning and reducing their reliance on grant based funding. In reality though, most are fire fighting and clutching at short term project funding to preserve core activity and jobs* (ibid, 24). Usefully the report injects a dose of realism around the viability of an overall strategy for the VCS of independent income generation, procurement, trading activities and social enterprise. Whilst these approaches may in some sense be 'necessary', they may only be sufficient for a minority of the VCS, and come with significant drawbacks.

Whilst the concept of sustainability, and associated ideas like healthy, vibrant and 'thriving' voluntary and community organisations, frequently arise in conversations about the sector, work seeking to define and operationalise these terms is only just emerging. For example, the Big Lottery Fund sought to define sustainability in terms of *"the continuation of the benefits and or activities of projects once [its] funding has ended"* (GHK 2006: 10). Coule (2004, 2005) notes that organisational sustainability goes beyond funding to include questions of strategic planning, maintaining attention to the mission of an organisation, human resources and maintaining a shared vision across the organisation. Macmillan et al (2007: 24) developed a definition of the

¹ See <http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/fundingcommission> for further information

financial sustainability of a voluntary organisation as “a measure of the organisation’s ability to win sufficient financial resources to deliver its core work on an ongoing basis”.

For Venturesome (2008: 3) ‘sustainability’ has problematic connotations because it is often regarded as 100% trading income, which is unrealistic for many voluntary organisations:

‘financial resilience’ is a better descriptor than ‘sustainability’. It suggests organisations that are better able to withstand financial shocks: for example, a major funder withdrawing a grant. It also suggests that gaining financial strength, progressing towards a healthy balance sheet, and securing an appropriate level of reserves is difficult and on-going, rather than a one-time fix.....Improving financial resilience is, in our experience, an on-going struggle, ‘a journey rather than a destination’.

Of course financial resilience and vulnerability have gained more salience in the emergence of a much more challenging economic climate for the sector. Wells et al (2009: 32) define vulnerability in these terms:

Financial vulnerability is best described as an organisation’s ability to withstand the impact of a ‘financial shock’ such as the loss of one or more income streams, a reduced rate of investment return, or the depreciation of an asset. A financially vulnerable organisation is one which is likely to have to reduce its service delivery as a result of a financial shock while those which are more financially resilient would be able to maintain service delivery levels despite such a shock.

The rationale behind promoting the health, sustainability and resilience of voluntary organisations and community groups is a concern with how those who value what the sector does or represents can ensure that these things continue. Carrington (2009: 8) articulates this well:

If a funder believes that a specific VCO is best placed to deliver a service or actions that it wishes to support, then a primary focus should, surely, be on ensuring that the VCO is capable and sufficiently resilient to take on the task.

3.2 The Response of SYSIP

The 2008 SYSIP evaluation annual report identified the existence of overlaps between different research themes, notably theme 3 ‘core infrastructure services’ (a set of processes and activities) and theme 2 ‘sustainability’ (resultant outcomes). It is hard to sustain a distinction between ‘core’ services provided by support organisations and those relating to finance, sustainability, commissioning and procurement. Many SYSIP funded activities are designed to cover both these themes simultaneously, and implicitly about increasing the sustainability of VCOs, within the changing funding context post-Objective 1.

Examples of the kind of work funded through SYSIP here include:

- Community Accountancy and Payroll Services (Doncaster, Rotherham and Sheffield)
- Funding Information and Advice (Doncaster and Sheffield)
- Human Resources and Legal Support (Rotherham and Sheffield)

- Organisational Support - Organisational Development (Barnsley), Business Planning (Doncaster), Small Groups Business Development (Rotherham) and Small Groups support (Sheffield)
- Quality Project (Sheffield)
- Procurement and Commissioning (Doncaster, Rotherham and Sheffield)
- Training (Sheffield).

These areas of support were primarily provided by the four Councils for Voluntary Service (CVSs) - Voluntary Action Barnsley, Doncaster CVS (and an array of sub-contracted organisations), Voluntary Action Rotherham and Voluntary Action Sheffield - along with South Yorkshire Funding Advice Bureau (SYFAB).

3.3 Evaluation Approach

The common question underpinning the ‘sustainability’ evaluation theme is:

to what extent and how are organisations supported by SYSIP-funded core infrastructure services stronger (more sustainable or resilient) as a result?

This involved the examination of three theories of change²:

1. *Income Diversification*: organisations can effectively be supported to diversify their income streams (whether grant, service or donations)
2. *Procurement*: VCS organisations can be supported to develop service delivery capacity and to better secure procurement contracts
3. *Core infrastructure*: Local infrastructure organisations can deliver more/better services to support VCS organisations.

The research in this theme looked at a number of cases of support around sustainability, where each case is regarded as *an instance or set of support interventions provided by VCS infrastructure organisations to frontline VCS organisations in South Yorkshire*.

² SYSIP Evaluation Paper 2: Review of Delivery Models, August 2007

4. Methodology

4.1 Introduction: using 'Part of the Picture'

The evaluation approach involved a study of individual voluntary and community organisations accessing a range of support services funded through SYSIP. The aim was to select a range of cases across different contexts and circumstances: for example across the four districts, involving organisations both with and without staff, and organisations with different kinds of needs or problems. Because the data held about supported or 'frontline' organisations by each support provider varied³, we decided to use the 'Part of the Picture' database as a starting point.

'Part of the Picture' was a mapping survey of the voluntary and community sector undertaken in 2006 (Macmillan 2006). As well as asking about key characteristics of voluntary and community organisations, it asked respondents to identify the extent to which a range of 22 separate issues were seen as a problem for the organisation in meeting its objectives. The question asked whether an issue was a major, significant, or slight problem, or whether it was no problem at all. From the results we constructed a single index, which can be used to compare individual issues against each other, as well as individual organisations and types of organization as a whole. For convenience, and because reported problems can be regarded as a proxy for support needs, the resulting index is referred to as the 'support needs index'⁴.

'Part of the Picture' concluded that the main issues regarded as problems for the sector were:

- *'raising funds'*: 51% of respondents regarded this as a significant or major problem, for which the overall 'support needs index' was 0.46;
- *'finding and recruiting new volunteers'*: 48% regarded this as a significant or major problem, for which the overall 'support needs index' was 0.41; and
- *'getting new members and users involved in your group'*: 40% regarded this as a significant or major problem, for which the overall 'support needs index' was 0.38.

Across all 636 organisations which answered this question fully, the index ranged from a low of 0.00 to a high of 0.89. But as table 4.1 below shows, the distribution is skewed towards lower scores. Very few organisations report lots of severe problems, and many report only slight problems. Figure 4.1 illustrates the skewed distribution by

³ For example, the intention was to distinguish between less and more intense forms of support, where *'less intense'* support might involve short-duration one-off instances of support with little follow up, or infrequent contact between provider and client organisation over time, and *'more intense'* support may involve more detailed, more frequent, ongoing/long term support, or support across a number of topics/providers. Because of data limitations and variety, it was not possible to identify cases of support in this way.

⁴ The 'support needs index' is constructed by weighting responses to the question *'To what extent are the following issues a problem for your group in meeting its objectives?'* 'Major problems' score 3, 'Significant problems' score 2, 'Slight problems' score 1, and 'No problem' scores 0. The maximum index score is 1.00, where all 22 issues were seen as major problems, and the minimum is 0.00 where all issues were regarded as 'no problem'.

ranking all 636 respondents in order of their individual scores on the 'support needs index' score

Table 4.2 below shows that the 'average' score (mean) on the index is 0.21. The 'middle' score (median), is 0.20. There is some variation, for example, reported problems in Barnsley are higher than in Rotherham, and likewise, if the 'support needs index' is a true guide, organisations with staff appear to have more severe needs than those without staff.

Table 4.1: Severity of support needs amongst VCOs in South Yorkshire, 2006

Support needs index	No. of cases	%
0.90-1.00	0	0.0
0.80-0.89	1	0.2
0.70-0.79	2	0.3
0.60-0.69	7	1.1
0.50-0.59	22	3.5
0.40-0.49	41	6.4
0.30-0.39	94	14.8
0.20-0.29	157	24.7
0.10-0.19	141	22.2
0.00-0.09	171	26.9
	636	100.0

Figure 4.1: South Yorkshire VCOs: Support needs index 2006

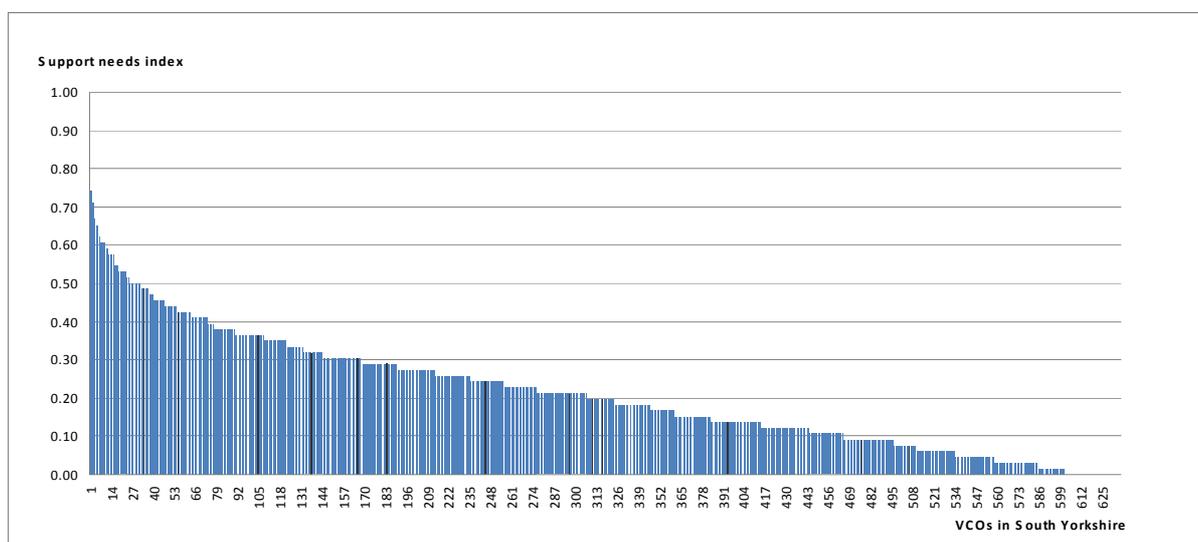


Table 4.2: Comparing the support needs index by district and staffing

	No. of cases	Support needs index
All cases	636	0.21
<i>Barnsley</i>	90	0.26
<i>Doncaster</i>	118	0.20
<i>Rotherham</i>	121	0.18
<i>Sheffield</i>	307	0.22
<i>No staff</i>	365	0.19
<i>Staff</i>	219	0.25

4.2 Sampling Frame for Case Selection

In order to select VCOs for further examination, a sampling frame was drawn up of organisations which had:

- provided information about their problems/support needs (from 'Part of the Picture'), *and*
- received support from core infrastructure agencies funded through SYSIP.

This would help provide contextual information about the problems expressed by individual voluntary and community organisations which had used SYSIP funded services, and simplify the selection procedure⁵.

Some information about recent support interventions and beneficiaries was collected from the four CVSs in South Yorkshire (and their sub-contractors where appropriate) and South Yorkshire Funding Advice Bureau. From these lists, some organisations would have received support several times from the same support provider, and some would have accessed a number of different providers. These lists were compared with respondents from 'Part of the Picture' to draw up a long list of potential cases for further investigation. Of the 636 respondents who completed the relevant 'support needs' question in 2006, 95 had also received support in various ways through SYSIP⁶.

Cases were selected to enable an investigation of a range of different scenarios in which SYSIP funded support was received. The 95 were sorted into 16 distinct groups (i.e. covering the four districts, whether they had paid staff or not, and whether they were above or below average on 'support needs index'), with the initial intention of selecting at least one from each group. The final sample of 13 cases accessed and studied is shown in table 4.3 below.

Table 4.3: SYSIP theme 3 evaluation cases, ordered by support needs index

Case	Staffing	Higher/Lower needs	Support needs index	Ranking needs by decile
B2	Staff	Higher	0.48	1
B1	Staff	Higher	0.42	1
S1	Staff	Higher	0.36	2
R2	Staff	Higher	0.32	3
S3	Staff	Higher	0.30	3
R4	Staff	Higher	0.29	3
D3	Staff	Higher	0.24	4
S4	No staff	Higher	0.21	5
D2	Staff	Lower	0.20	5
R3	Staff	Lower	0.20	6
D1	Staff	Lower	0.14	7
R1	No staff	Lower	0.09	8
S2	Staff	Lower	0.08	8

Notes:

1. B – Barnsley; D – Doncaster; R – Rotherham; S – Sheffield. All cases have been anonymised for the purposes of this report.
2. 'Higher/Lower needs' – whether the case is above or below average (0.21) on the 'support needs index'
3. 'Ranking by decile' – where each case falls in a ranking of 636 VCOs on the 'support needs index'. Organisations in decile 1 are the 10% of organisations reporting the most severe needs.

⁵ Although in practice this proved to be problematic as it also served to restrict the number of cases available for investigation, and made access to organisations difficult.

⁶ It is important to note that this number is not exhaustive. It is likely that many more 'Part of the Picture' respondents received support through SYSIP, for example earlier in the programme.

4.3 About the Case Studies

The 13 cases include four each from Sheffield and Rotherham, three from Doncaster and two from Barnsley. Most of the organisations employed paid staff: only two of the cases were volunteer-only organisations.

For the last year in which financial data is available, in respect of 11 of the cases:

- Two had an annual income of less than £15,000 (both volunteer-only organisations)
- Two had an annual income of just less than £100,000
- Four had an annual income of between £100,000 and £250,000
- Three had an annual income of between £250,000 and £750,000.

For the eight organisations in which financial data is available over the whole period 2004/5 to 2008/9, total income grew from £1.18m to £1.65m, but expenditure grew at a faster rate from £0.99m to £1.57m. Most of the organisations grew during this period; three more than doubled in size. Only two organisations saw their income contract over the period, but there was also a degree of financial turbulence: several experienced both expansion and contraction during the period.

In terms of the severity of problems as reported in 2006, the case studies exhibit a good range across the 'support needs index'. Eight cases were higher than average, and five below average. As a group the 13 cases indicate greater severity of need (average 0.26) than the 'Part of the Picture' respondents as a whole (average 0.21). The main differences in needs expressed by the case study group against 'Part of the Picture' respondents overall, suggest a group of case studies on the whole facing more complex or advanced problems and support needs:

- *'Negotiating contracts and service level agreements'* (0.31, compared to 0.12 for Part of the Picture respondents as a whole)
- *'Identifying and evaluating the impact of your group or the difference it makes to your services users'* (0.33, compared with 0.17 for Part of the Picture respondents as a whole)
- *'Keeping up with latest policy developments in your area of work'* (0.27, compared with 0.16 for Part of the Picture respondents as a whole)
- *'Managing staff'* (0.18, compared with 0.08 for Part of the Picture respondents as a whole)

In the next section we examine how the selected cases came to access support from core infrastructure, what support was provided, and what difference it is thought to have made to the organisations themselves.

5. Case study findings

5.1 Why is support needed?

In terms of the actual problems or issues for which organisations sought support, the cases exhibit a good variety, enabling a sound test of the usefulness and impact of the range of support interventions funded through SYSIP. The kinds of issues facing the case study organisations include:

- The need for information, advice and support around *specialist technical or professional services*: preparing accounts, independent examination, payroll, human resources advice on recruitment, redundancy procedures and sickness absence. One case described the need for services of this kind in terms of avoiding the risk of 'getting it wrong':

R3 is a multi-purpose resource centre with an annual income of approximately £150,000, of which just under one third is generated through fees for use of the facilities. R3 employs 10 paid staff, and previously reported just below average support needs. It has an established and ongoing relationship with the local CVS. Through SYSIP it has accessed support on a range of issues when necessary, rather than for a specific piece of work. Much of the support has been for reassurance purposes, for example, its manager noted that *"we used the HR resource to advertise vacancies through the CVS. We have also used them to talk through the details of potential redundancies. It has been very useful to have access to specialist support - even if only to verify the approach that we would have taken"*. The CVS was used as a source of expertise because *"there is a risk of us getting it wrong"*.

- Issues around *funding and finance*, such as the 'stop-start' development associated with short term funding, the difficulties raising small amounts of funding, and emergency funding situations. In addition, a marked feature of the case studies here was the concerns and needs associated with the changing funding environment, and a consideration of whether and how organisations might need to change in response. Some organisations wanted to find out about the new world of contracts, tendering, commissioning and procurement, through training and information sessions, and were interested to develop possibilities for generating income. Others were already familiar with the language of the emerging funding landscape, and had more advanced support needs, for example around preparing successful tenders, building consortia to bid for contracts, skills in negotiating contracts and sub-contracts, and how to develop physical assets for delivering services and earning income.

D1 is a well established multi-purpose social enterprise, which also provides support to other voluntary organisations, social enterprises and community groups. Because of this it suggested that it has relatively low support needs, but instead identified what its manager called 'development needs'. The organisation had been aware of the changing agenda in the third sector and had undertaken a form of development analysis resulting in seeking training and support to rise to this challenge. The manager highlighted that the organisation needed support in meeting the challenges of what was coming in the near future, specifically the development and extension of commissioning and procurement. She described how, as a result, the organisation needed to be 'contract ready'.

- Related to the need to understand and respond to a changing funding landscape, some case study organisations were concerned with inter-related aspects of *organisational development*, regarded as part of a process of becoming more strategic and professional. This involved changes in legal status (becoming a registered charity or company limited by guarantee), developing a business plan, supporting trustee development, reviewing policies and procedures and introducing a quality assurance system:

B1 reported above average support needs. It has had a history of trying to maintain an essential service whilst managing short term funding. This has led to relatively faltering periods of development, consequent staff turnover and problems recruiting volunteers. It was thought that the organisation was in a vulnerable position without a long term strategy, and having an outdated structure which funders could not understand. There seemed no point in working to develop a strategy and action plan because funding was so precarious, but this might be a 'chicken and egg' situation if the lack of a strategy affected its ability to secure funding. B1 sought support in understanding why the organisation needed to change, what options about routes forward were available, and in establishing new governance structures.

In addition, interviewees referred to the use of skills audits amongst staff and management committee members, and subsequently the pursuit of specific training sessions for which a need had been identified. One interviewee described how the strategy to pursue training emerged in reverse, by looking to see what training was on offer before deciding what might be useful and what to attend.

5.2 How was support accessed?

Local support agencies and their funders are often exercised by the question of who knows about and accesses the support offered. In particular there are concerns about the differing extent to which support agencies have the capacity to 'reach out' beyond a caseload of regular users to less well connected organisations, alongside the capacity of the less well connected to 'reach in' to access support.

Overwhelmingly the case studies in theme 3 were already well connected with local voluntary sector support agencies, and had used them regularly in the past. This skews the findings somewhat, as the cases appear to know what support might be available, and how to access it, to a greater extent than voluntary and community organisations in South Yorkshire as a whole. The potential bias in the sample of case studies is shown by data from the 'Part of the Picture' survey. Whilst the index of

support needs for reported problems in '*Finding out what support is available*' was 0.23 for survey respondents as a whole, the figure for the 13 case studies as a whole is only 0.13.

Nonetheless, the cases illustrate how the support funded through SYSIP was accessed. Many of the respondents from case study organisations had a great deal of prior knowledge of their local infrastructure support agencies and knowledge about what they could offer. This was usually because they had used services in the past. In some cases more formal links were in place, such as: earlier co-location of organisations or people; where a project worker in a small organisation was line managed by a staff member from the local Council for Voluntary Service; where individuals were simultaneously involved in both organisations (a board member of one supported organisation provided training on behalf of the local support organisation) or a sub-contractual relationship between two agencies.

In other cases, respondents described themselves as being highly proactive in digesting information from local support agencies and pursuing support as necessary: for example, being 'on the look out' for suitable training opportunities. Organisations were on mailing lists and received e-mail alerts or bulletins, as well as flyers and brochures. Respondents attended events and were involved in networking with other organisations and support providers. Whilst some sought support actively, others were more generally aware of what could be provided, and so used services and support 'as and when necessary'.

Despite its remote location in a rural village on the edge of the borough, B2 described good historical links with its local CVS. It is on the mailing list for newsletters and other information, and commented that the website was always up to date. B2's coordinator described how proactive he was about looking for what is on offer and who is doing what. He relies heavily for information on email contact and word of mouth through networking events. He makes a careful strategic choice about attending such events, asking himself "*what can I get out of it?*"

D2 is well versed in the training, support and services available through its local CVS. Its manager indicated that the organisation is "*always on the look out*" for training opportunities relevant to its needs. D2 has an Organisation Development Plan which includes training needs identified from annual staff appraisals and resultant Action Plans. This acts as a staff skills audit. Time scales are then set and training opportunities identified from various sources, including the CVS, and through SYSIP, its sub-contractors and other support agencies across South Yorkshire. D2 receives regular emails and flyers and finds the CVS training calendar very useful. From SYSIP it accessed training on: sustainability, future funding streams, use of the internet, volunteering, first aid/health and safety, public speaking/presentation skills, beating the recession, feasibility studies - exploring new areas to develop, and tendering - first steps.

R2 has an annual turnover of approximately £400,000. It previously reported above average support needs. Internal discussions identified a range of issues to be addressed, but initially the local CVS was not necessarily recognised as a source of support for these needs; a key starting point would have been the internet. However, relatively close geographical proximity has facilitated ease of access. The coordinator visited the new CVS building: *“I nipped in to them to see what they did. I asked the receptionist and she gave me a pack”*. The CVS is now seen as an ongoing source of support – *“we are still in touch, and I get lots of emails. There is nothing specific but I can access them if I need help”*.

There are myriad ways in which organisations are ‘kept in touch’ with latest developments and new services. Mostly this was valued as providing helpful updates and useful information, though a concern was expressed about ‘information overload’ and the capacity to make sense of it all. One interviewee called for more selective information, with more interpretation of new initiatives and policies, rather than the practice of simply forwarding email bulletins on from other sources: *“The main ‘support’ is through emails... some of it is useful, but often it is forwarded emails ... this is lazy ... we would like more of a commentary - well written and you want to read it”*

Some degree of effort and time is required in becoming aware of what support is on offer, keeping up to date, and knowing who to contact and how they might help. Thus the ‘capacity’ to access support, which might then ‘build capacity’, becomes an issue. Smaller, newer and less well connected organisations may find themselves effectively ‘locked out’ of support provision because they lack the capacity to access it in the first place.

How do organisations find out about supporting institutions and programmes if they do not already know, and have limited capacity to connect with others to find out through ‘word of mouth’? The case study below provides an example for one small organisation.

R1 is a small volunteer-only organisation with relatively minor support needs. It heard about the support on offer from its CVS through publicity in the local press. R1 had immediate and specific requirements for help with accounts following the retirement of an accountant who had previously undertaken the task for free. The CVS ‘came to the rescue’ through the ‘at cost’ support of the Community Accountancy Service, but also sought to offer a range of other services. In a minor way, and from knowing relatively little about support services, R1 has become a little more ‘plugged in’ to the range of services and networks available to support the sector. In this case, the CVS provided a health check and made a referral to specialist funding information and advice from SYFAB.

5.3 What support was provided?

Case studies described a diverse mix of support interventions from local support providers funded through SYSIP. Table 5.1 provides an indication of support accessed.

The striking feature about this table, providing information for only 13 organisations about the support they have accessed over the last few years, is the sheer range of support activities on offer, in terms of the subjects and issues covered, the type of intervention and the method of delivery. The main infrastructure bodies supported through SYSIP have been able to offer different levels of support, from introductory awareness-raising training and information sessions, through ongoing support services, such as accountancy, payroll and tailored funding searches, to more specialist and in-depth support on quality systems, legal advice, procurement and organisational development.

S4 is a volunteer-only organisation with an annual income of just under £10,000 and an average level of support needs. Although small, it is well networked and aware of the services and support provided by local support agencies: *“We knew what [the CVS] does and therefore to ask ... it was easy...They seem to come up with an answer very quickly”*. Through SYSIP S4 was supported through volunteers coming through the local Volunteer Centre, legal advice - firstly in becoming a registered charity and secondly over a dispute with the landlords of the premises in which the organisation operates, and through funding information and advice: *“We have received non-financial support from others, in particular from SYFAB... this was very helpful, it revealed lots of opportunities and it is a free service ... we have used them many times”*. S4 suggested that the help offered through SYSIP had made the organisation more sustainable, but noted that it was hard to quantify: *“[The CVS] has made a very big contribution to policy development and to clarify the aims of this organisation...It has helped us be more sustainable and look at different ways of working – it provided a momentum and helped define our core values ... it would have been harder to get things up and running without [the CVS]; it has helped us work in a structured way and helped us to maintain our passion for this work... But it is a struggle to keep things going ... Our aspiration is to have some paid staff. This is something we are thinking about ... but we then need someone to manage and coordinate ... it would put more pressure on us”*

Table 5.1: SYSIP case studies – support accessed

Case	Support needs index	Support	Type one off, ongoing	Method 1-to-1; 1-to-many
B2	0.48	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training to fill identified staff skills gaps, on: EU funding, how your town works, Compact, tendering, HR training and support • Support on trustee's induction • Advice on changing status to become a charitable company 	Series of one off interventions	Primarily 1-to-many, with some direct 1-to-1 support
B1	0.42	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitation of an away day to develop a five year strategy • Helping to work towards PQASSO • Advice on a skills audit for the management committee 	Ongoing	Primarily 1-to-1
S1	0.36	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding search • Help with quality assurance and reviewing policies and procedures as the organization grows 	One off and ongoing support	1-to-1
R2	0.32	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training (not specified), other than workshop on procurement • Support from the Volunteer Centre • HR support 	Series of one off interventions	Mixed 1-to-1 and 1-to-many
S3	0.30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Payroll service • HR and legal advice when needed • Advice on PQASSO and consortium building 	Mostly ongoing support	1-to-1
R4	0.29	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisational health check, development of an action plan • Reviews • Payroll service • Training: commissioning and procurement • Support from procurement advisor 	Series of one off interventions	Mixed 1-to-1 and 1-to-many
D3	0.24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training on pre-qualification questionnaires and tendering • Advice regarding commissioning and procurement • Information on tendering opportunities • Information exchange network amongst social enterprises 	Series of one off interventions	Primarily 1-to-many, with peer learning
S4	0.21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support on retaining volunteers • Funding search for small amounts • Legal advice on becoming a charity and other issues 	One off interventions	1-to-1
D2	0.20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training on sustainability, future funding streams, volunteering, beating the recession, public law, first steps in tendering, how to undertake feasibility studies 	Series of one off interventions	1-to-many
R3	0.20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Payroll service • Training: full cost recovery and risk assessment • Funding support • Volunteer centre (to establish a volunteer exchange) • HR support on recruitment and redundancy • Business coach support for social enterprise 	Series of one off interventions	Mixed 1-to-1 and 1-to-many
D1	0.14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training to respond to changing developmental third sector agenda (for example, commissioning, procurement and tender readiness, understanding a tender, consortium building, developing social enterprise) • Information exchange network amongst social enterprises 	Series of one off interventions	1-to-many and peer learning
R1	0.09	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help with accounts • Organisational health check, development of an action plan and follow up support • Referral to specialist support agency (for funding advice) 	Set of one off interventions	1-to-1
S2	0.08	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support with accounting: preparing management accounts, independent examination • Advice on employment terms and conditions • Funding search 	One off interventions	1-to-1

5.4 What difference has the support made?

Interviews with case study respondents asked what difference the support had made to their organisations. Most were extremely positive about the support they had received and the impact it was thought to have had. In fact there were very few critical comments. Table 5.2 provides more detail of the assessments made by respondent organisations about the difference support had made.

Case study organisations suggested that the support accessed overall had made them stronger, more confident and more aware of the changing environment in which they were operating. In addition, several cases noted how the support provided had made them more strategic, professional and business like. In their eyes, this would help them present their organisation to funders and commissioners with enhanced credibility. This was particularly evident in relation to more intense forms of support, such as facilitating the development of a strategy, or advising on the implementation of a quality standards system, as indicated in this case study:

B1 is a small but growing organisation with four staff members and around 20 regular volunteers. It has been in operation for over 20 years, and over the last few years its turnover has begun to grow. For much its history B1 has been organised as a collective, but this caused some difficulty in seeking funding for the service, as funding organisations found the non-hierarchical structure difficult to understand. It sought support from the local CVS to help with understanding why the organisation needed to change, options for the future, and to help establish a new organisation with new governance structures. These were regarded as necessary to bring B1 in line with funding expectations, so that B1 would *"carry more weight"* with funders, become more professional in its outlook and have a clear direction of travel. Through SYSIP the CVS assisted in B1 becoming a registered charity, facilitated a strategy day which resulted in the production of a 5 year strategy, and B1 is now working towards a quality assurance standard. Additional support on payroll, financial systems and trustee training is being provided.

According to B1, the organisation is much stronger as a result of the help from the CVS. For example: the support led to changes to the organisation which, it was suggested, had increased its potential to attract grant funding. B1 noted that the new strategy, with defined outputs and a clear monitoring system, contributed to its success in securing four year funding to 2013 from the Big Lottery Fund, and argued that this was because B1 now appeared to be a professional organisation in its operation and outlook. Stable funding has bought the organisation time to consolidate itself, work towards PQASSO and update policies and procedures. As a result, B1 suggested that it could now prepare to develop new networks and engage with the service commissioning and procurement agenda should that be a future choice of direction.

Table 5.2: SYSIP case studies – assessment of the difference made by support

Case	Support needs index	Assessment of difference made
B2	0.48	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training helped improve skills, and helped the organisation understand the environment and to move towards sustainability • A more business-oriented model of operation (with appropriate systems and policies) has been developed out of the support provided, and this has enhanced the organisation's credibility by being able to demonstrate its skills and competences
B1	0.42	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The development of a new constitution, policies and procedures and undertaking work towards PQASSO has helped make the organisation more professional and strategic • The development of a new strategy has increased the potential to attract funding by making the organisation look more professional • The organisation is better prepared for commissioning and procurement
S1	0.36	<p>The organisation is stronger as a result of working towards PQASSO – the support was helpful but time limited and the process is onerous and would be shelved if staff too busy. The process:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • helped the organisation become more strategic and sustainable • helped act as a catalyst by providing justification for changes seen by some as necessary. • helped tighten financial policies and procedures; trustee procedures and identify skills gaps • assisted Action and Business Planning (providing essential evidence for funders)
R2	0.32	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact of support is hard to assess as the respondent was not directly involved. • Networking was useful in raising awareness of others and the possibility of working together • Training was useful – a lot was learnt and good resources were provided, but the learning has not been put into practice yet
S3	0.30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skilful support around PQASSO in reducing suspicion between participants and in making it relevant and not so onerous
R4	0.29	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specialist HR support appreciated over intractable issues • Better control of finances and new ways of working by supporting the treasurer • Revamped business plan
D3	0.24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training on the commissioning and procurement agenda and tendering was the most useful as it started from basics so the organisation now understands the process. • As a result it reports increased confidence and believes that it is in a better position to compete
S4	0.21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Becoming a charity identified as a significant step, and the support helped to clarify aims, define core values, and keep the passion in the organisation alive • the organisation is thought to be more sustainable and more structured • free information on funding opportunities is very helpful
D2	0.20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the organisation is much stronger and more able to exist in changing times. • It is recognised as being able to provide a professional service, and new policies have changed working practices • Training has built the confidence of staff, and the organisation can evidence these skills in tenders
R3	0.20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning from others and gaining confidence through others (informal benchmarking) • Specialist help was useful as a verification process and is time efficient in saving the burden of having to develop in-house support • information on funding streams judged as useful
D1	0.14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training and support useful in helping to understand the external environment and national agenda, and to expand the organisation's thinking regarding planning and securing new business. • Helped the organisation to focus on priorities and sustainability. Practical support helped secure contracts, by increasing understanding of what is needed in presenting a 'winning case' in relation to what commissioners are looking for, rather than just submitting a 'good application'
R1	0.09	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The CVS 'came to the rescue' by looking at the accounts at cost • the health check provided some reassurance that no 'alarm bells' were ringing in the organisation • that a funding application was vetted in advance was regarded as a reason for its success
S2	0.08	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support was mostly just straightforward but helpful and essential to the effective operation of the organisation and to fulfil requirements • Without the support the organisation would have to provide for itself (which might divert it from its mission) or pay for private assistance for what would be considered as a less responsive service

Less intense support interventions, such as training sessions on particular topics, or general information and guidance, tended to be described as useful, even if they had not been used yet in practice, as illustrated by this case study:

B2 reported the highest support needs in the sample of organisations interviewed for this study. Its coordinator suggested that overall it was led by what was on offer in relation to need rather than through any strategic planning of training and support such as identified in a Business Plan. For him the training must add value and have some relevance to the organisation. Training had been accessed through the CVS and other agencies through workshops on, for example, 'How your town works' (regarded as helpful in terms of joint working and identifying partners), European Funding, tendering, Human Resources, and the role of trustees. Other support had been received on funding sources from SYFAB, which was described as providing a good systematic approach to funding guidance - "*it does what it says on the tin*". According to B2's coordinator, being able to access training helped the organisation to grow and improve its skills. As a result, he thought that the organisation understood more about the current climate and helped it move towards sustainability. New systems, policies and procedures were now in place and he commented that the organisation was more businesslike and professional. The next step was to work towards a quality assurance framework, which would benefit the organisation in the long term by enabling B2 to bid for contracts and demonstrate evidence of its quality. However, the coordinator was concerned that the organisation as a whole was reluctant to embrace it as half the activity time is delivered by volunteers who were not confident in being judged.

The kinds of *general* impacts described by case study organisations include:

- reassurance from expert sources that an organisation is operating appropriately, which could be around technical issues or more general concerns
- support on technical issues which creates efficiencies within organisations by reducing the burden of having to develop in-house capacity (for example human resources advice and community accountancy)

S2 is a small neighbourhood advice agency which had previously reported very low support needs – only 0.08 on the support needs index, the lowest in the case study sample. S2 has a small staff team and around 25 volunteers. Through SYSIP it accessed ongoing support primarily around community accountancy and payroll, including independent examination, help to improve financial record keeping and procedures, and advice on employment terms and conditions. S2 was aware of and easily able to access the available support, and regarded it very positively: the support was seen as helpful, well delivered and responsive to S2's requirements. Although straightforward, S2 suggested that these services were essential both to the effective operation of the organisation, and for it to be able to fulfil its legal requirements as a charity. This kind of support was important for S2 as it removed some significant burdens from the staff and volunteers whose focus might otherwise be diverted away from S2's core work. Community accountancy support was regarded as much better than that provided by auditors: it was thought to be more responsive, higher quality and cheaper. Not all of the advice was well received, however, and in this case there was a disagreement over reserves – whether, and if so, for what purpose S2 would be well advised to build up some reserves.

- being kept up to date with latest issues, legislation and policy as a preventative strategy to avoid problems arising
- resolution of problems when things actually go awry, and
- increased knowledge and awareness of new developments in the funding and policy environments.

D2 is a well established charity providing social care services, and previously reported average support needs. It has grown steadily over the last 5 years and now has an annual income of just over £200,000. D2's manager spoke positively about the help and support received through SYSIP, mainly in the form of training. She thought the organisation was much stronger and much more able to exist in a changing sector. She considered the training and support to have helped in "*getting the organisation to provide a professional service*", so that, as a result, it now has new policies, has questioned and subsequently changed its working practices (so that it is able to "*tick the quality boxes*" on tender applications), can evidence the staff skills, and intends to expand. Compared to some organisations working in the D2's field, its manager suggested that it has a strong and skilled staff team to be able to expand, consider new opportunities, and facilitate sub-contracting relationships with other organisations.

More *specifically*, case study organisations reported that the support accessed through SYSIP funded infrastructure enabled them to:

- develop in new areas, including instigating necessary organisational change. For example, help to work towards the adoption of quality assurance systems acted as a self-administered health check by organisations and a catalyst for organisational improvement

S1 is a relatively new but fast growing organisation, with an annual income of just over £100,000. It reported above average support needs (at nearly twice the average score on the support needs index). S1 has two part time staff members: a volunteer manager (responsible for recruiting and supporting the 60 volunteers who deliver the service) and an administrative worker. Staff members are line managed by the local Council for Voluntary Service (CVS), and through this route become aware of and signposted to particular support services. Through SYSIP, support has been received around community accountancy, an IT audit and quality standards. PQASSO (Practical Quality Assurance System for Small Organisations) was chosen as a quality standards system as it suited the organisation. The CVS helped with the discussions around PQASSO for a limited time period. Although an onerous task for S1, the work towards PQASSO was regarded positively as it enabled the organisation to introduce and justify changes in working practices, policies and procedures, particularly around financial procedures and governance. This helped identify skills gaps amongst the trustees, and to prompt attempts to recruit trustees with expertise in finance and funding issues. In addition the framework provided by PQASSO was helping to structure a process of producing a business plan and allied action plans. PQASSO was described as the catalyst for developing a five year plan as a way of making S1 more strategic and sustainable.

S3 is a well established medium-sized charity with higher support needs, mainly around its mission, financial sustainability and more recently the need for quality assurance as a condition of joining a consortium of VCS organisations to bid for contracts. It was very clear as to the services which a CVS could and should provide, and S3 has had contact on a range of services over time. Support through SYSIP has been around payroll, legal advice and HR and more recently around consortium building and quality assurance. Support and follow up advice around introducing a quality framework was valued and much appreciated. But this was seen as a necessary step rather than part of an organisational transformation. Although appreciated and well received, there was some doubt about the impact of the process: *"[The CVS worker] was able to deal with our cynicism about it ... she made it not too onerous for us ... Did it make a great difference? I don't know....Quality needs ongoing work and it was helpful that [she] would come and see us every six months when the project ran and ask how we were doing ... but the project has now ended and I am looking at the manual sitting on the shelf in front of me ... these things need implementation and embedding"*

- learn from others, for example by bringing together and facilitating discussions amongst organisations in similar positions. The 'Learning Circle' initiative, a meeting point of social enterprises, was a case in point:

Despite funding coming to an end, members of the 'Learning Circle' of social enterprises continued to meet as it was considered to be very useful, with invited guest speakers talking on issues of relevance. Subsequently the group self-funded the meetings which were thought to be important in networking, exchanging information and generating business. It helped to highlight which organisations were operating and where in the local area, and was described by one interviewee as *"helping to know you are not alone"*.

- gain credibility in seeking to present a professional image to funders, and
- become more aware of, and feel more prepared for, the emerging commissioning and procurement agenda.

Through SYSIP D1 had accessed a range of training and support, particularly on sustainability and tendering for contracts. D1's manager explained that this was useful and allowed her to expand her thinking about planning and securing future business. The support helped D1:

- focus on priorities and develop sustainable strategies;
- present their case in the most effective way (i.e. *"what makes a good application into a winning application"*);
- develop internal skills and knowledge to access the right kind of investment opportunity and understand what was needed to achieve that;
- understand the external environment and what public sector bodies are looking for; and
- increase its knowledge of the national agenda for the third sector.

In addition, D1's manager argued that the practical support on tendering had helped the organisation to become 'contract ready' and subsequently actually to win contracts.

Although the case studies were overwhelmingly positive about the support they accessed, a small number of points were raised as areas where improvements could be made, where alternative models of support could be debated, or as new areas for development:

- *Leadership*: a call for a greater sense of leadership around a vision for the sector in South Yorkshire. This might imply a proactive agenda around the articulating the sector's potential role and place in the South Yorkshire economy and community life, as opposed to a more defensive and reactive one focusing primarily on responding to the day to day problems and needs of voluntary organisations and community groups. This was allied to a broader critique of the concentration of resources on support agencies:

"[The CVS] is too big, it is unwieldy and it gets too much resource... The perception of [it] is that they have a lot of resources but offer few outputs... [It] delivers its outputs and finances very well ... they are a safe place for money but they are not driven by affecting change... [Support agencies] need to campaign more actively for the VCS but they don't understand how to or the needs of the VCS ... [They] don't work effectively because they get [local authority] money ... [They] don't know how to effect change... they don't understand change management ... they should do less on the specifics ... they need to develop a vision for the sector ... they need to say where they are taking us"

- *Alternative models*: With some recognition of how support services can become overstretched and patchy, it was suggested that some specialist services might be more suitably delivered through the private sector, or through independent consultants, or organised on a national basis. These comments also contribute to the debate already underway within South Yorkshire's support providers, about the extent to which they should differentiate between those organisations who can pay for services and those who cannot. A couple of the organisations interviewed here were prepared to pay for specialised external support where this is needed.

However, respondent organisations tended to note the importance of local VCS support agencies knowing the sector well and being attuned to the needs of local voluntary organisations and community groups. This enables them to be responsive, and to: *“understand where we come from”*.

R2 emphasised the individualised nature of the service offered by the CVS. Its coordinator commented on how he appreciated access to support from an organisation that understands the needs of the voluntary sector: *“they understand the organisation and where we are trying to go. If they can't provide answers they will look into it and send you elsewhere. They are very interested and it's a personal service, one to one chats. It's good that they are interested in what we do”*.

The manager of R3 highlighted the importance of historical links and the development of ongoing relationships between R3 and the CVS: *“For things like HR there are alternatives but we are happy using [the CVS] as there is an established relationship there.”*

The Chief Executive of R4 expressed a general sense of dissatisfaction with other providers which were not attuned to the needs of the voluntary sector organisations. R4 had previously used private sector payroll providers. One had relocated their system to the Far East *“which made it very difficult to deal with”*, whilst another was described as *“so business-like, I got the impression that they thought I was stupid if I didn't understand something. It was to the point that I was putting off making phone calls”*. In contrast, the CVS payroll service was described as *“very competitive, it works very well. You know who you are talking to and they understand where you are coming from”*.

- *Knowledge, expertise and capacity* in social enterprise, in asset-based development, and in commissioning and procurement could be developed further. It was suggested that knowledge about ‘traditional VCS issues’ (such as providing information and advice about grant funding and constitutions, etc) was well developed within the main support organisations, but knowledge and expertise around social enterprise could be stronger. The sector has a well-established funding advice service for groups seeking traditional forms of funding, but it was suggested, in the light of the emerging commissioning and procurement environment, that greater capacity to support organisations entering this arena (‘hand-holding’) would be welcome. This could involve checking pre-qualification questionnaires, expressions of interest and bids for contracts. This speaks to a larger issue of how support providers organise their services to meet the needs across a very diverse local sector, and particularly how to pitch services at the right level. A larger organisation suggested that the training on offer tended to be too basic. It was suggested that the main infrastructure bodies should make greater efforts to canvass what support is needed across the whole spectrum of the sector.

D3 is a relatively new but rapidly expanding social enterprise, currently employing 20 staff. It is a registered charity and company limited by guarantee, and previously reported slightly above average support needs, primarily around generating income and negotiating contracts with commissioners and prime contractors. Initial grant funding for D3 has come to an end and it now seeks public sector contracts in its specialist field, either as the main contractor or as a sub-contract to a larger organisation. D3's Chief Executive expressed some disappointment about the level and usefulness of advice and support available around social enterprise and on commissioning and procurement. The former was described as ad hoc and fragmented, whilst the latter required a more individual support service rather than just training and events. For example, he would like to see the sector providing advice about pre-qualification questionnaires (PQQs) in the form of "*casting an eye on the detail*". Without this organisations could not feel confident about their content nor whether it would prove successful. However, the training on commissioning and procurement funded through SYSIP was viewed favourably – a well pitched one day training event took participants through the whole tendering process from beginning to end, and enabled D3 to understand the whole process. As a result, D3's Chief Executive indicated that he was more confident in the tendering process, knew where to look for tender opportunities and knew more about PQQs. The organisation was much stronger as a result and better placed to compete for tenders.

R3's main need currently is for access to expertise and resources in relation to the ownership and development of a community building: "*[We need] more expertise and capital investment regarding developing buildings. I can't see how we will access that other than by learning by ourselves. There are few other organisations in similar circumstances, and no expertise in the ownership and phased development of buildings. I haven't got a way of flagging that up with CVSs...We will get there though there should be a more efficient way of doing it*"

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

Thirteen case study organisations, chosen to exhibit a range of organisations accessing a variety of support services funded through SYSIP, have been able to provide extensive reflections about the support needs they have, the services they accessed and the difference they are thought to have made. In conclusion, we draw attention to three issues for ongoing and further discussion:

- the question of sustainability
- demonstrating the impact of infrastructure support, and
- targeting infrastructure investment.

6.2 Sustainability

The 'sustainability' theme of the SYSIP evaluation focused on the question:

to what extent and how are organisations supported by SYSIP-funded core infrastructure services stronger (more sustainable or resilient) as a result?

The thirteen case study organisations interviewed in-depth here were overwhelmingly positive in their assessment of the support they have accessed. This is not a surprising conclusion. Those organisations 'touched by' or able to access support from infrastructure agencies tend to be relatively positive, whilst those outside the loop tend to be more critical.

We are not in a position to provide a conclusive and authoritative judgement about whether the case study organisations are *actually* stronger, more sustainable and resilient, and if so by how much. This is likely to require a longer term assessment than has been possible here.

However, our respondents, that is, people who might be expected to know most about the impact of the support on their organisation, clearly think they are stronger and more sustainable. Their perspectives might form a provisional proxy for the impact of support services funded through SYSIP.

Their confidence about the future prospects for their organisations and the work they do appears to have been enhanced. This has occurred through a variety of different means, but primarily across three inter-related dimensions. It involves organisations:

- developing more appropriate and better structures, systems, policies and procedures to support their work
- adopting a more strategic, planned, professional, forward-looking and networked outlook

- becoming more aware, knowledgeable and skilled about their 'operating environment', that is, the changing funding and policy context in which they work.

In combination these impacts provide us with good reasons to expect the case study organisations to be more sustainable. Together they are thought by case study interviewees to place their organisations on a stronger footing, with an improved profile and reputation, to be able to access and secure resources to continue and enhance their activities.

It will of course remain to be seen whether the organisations have in fact become more resilient through SYSIP-funded support, and thus whether the relative confidence of interviewees here is warranted. Many of the case studies reflected on the future context in which their organisations would be operating. This involves changing funding regimes post Objective 1 and the new emphasis being placed on service commissioning and procurement. Access to support around financial and organisational sustainability appears from the findings of this study to have gone some way towards preparing organisations for this changing context. However, the case studies also provide a strong sense of realism around the 'sustainability' agenda, particularly in relation to the prospects for independent income generation, as these two examples illustrate:

B2's coordinator suggested that 'evolution was in progress' for the organisation. Around 5 years ago the organisation was reliant on grants with some nominal charges. But decreasing grants, particularly European funding, was putting added pressure on funders. As a result it was thought that B2 needed to change the balance between charity and social enterprise. It was changing slowly and moving more towards a sustainable business model, but the coordinator suggested that it will never be self-sustaining. The concern was that funders now expect organisations to generate some income and he wondered how viable this will be for B2 as an organisation.

S3's main work focuses on community development and regeneration. In recent years it has moved from being almost wholly supported through grant funding to a position where around a third of its income is derived from contracts and service level agreements. However, the idea that this is a long term continuing shift towards independent income generation is treated with some scepticism: *"There are three models of sustainability and none of them work: management fees, service income; and asset management. There is no way we could become a sustainable organisation ... community engagement is not valued enough social care organisations are valued and delivered but we are not"*.

6.3 Demonstrating the impact of infrastructure support

Nationally the debate about demonstrating the impact of capacity building and infrastructure continues. Many infrastructure organisations face pressure, from funders, members and users, to identify and quantify the difference their support and

services make in relation to the resources invested. Developing a consistent, convincing and useable methodology continues to be a 'work in progress'⁷.

Many infrastructure organisations would not be able to support a full evaluation of their services. Even here a number of case study organisations were interviewed at length about the impact of the support services they had accessed, and yet finding convincing evidence of it was not always straightforward.

We have well-founded perceptions of the difference made by support interventions from those closest to it, but we have noted that a more rounded consideration requires a test of time. In addition, support interventions, the organisational settings in which they occur, and the changes that may result are hugely complex. A wide range of factors, decisions, behaviours and actions come together in the notion of 'impact'. Isolating the contribution made by a specific intervention is unlikely to be easy.

But also within the interviews for this evaluation study it is worth reflecting on three further 'leakages' from a rounded demonstration of impact, which put some limits around how knowledgeable interviewees were. We came across examples of all three in the interviews. These are:

- *faltering memory* – because support interventions by infrastructure agencies may have been some time ago, it was not always clear to our interviewees what support had been accessed, how it was received and regarded at the time, and whether and what changes it led to.
- *partial knowledge* – because support interventions typically occur at an organisational level, some people within supported organisations may only have partial knowledge of the context in which support needs were identified, support sought and accessed, and the difference it made. This could be because people move on within voluntary and community organisations and new people will not know all of the background, or because people have only been partially involved in the support, particularly in respect of larger and more complex organisations.
- *unclear contribution* – because the contribution of a particular support provider or person is unclear, unpublicised, or obscure⁸, a full attributable picture of the difference made is not always available to interviewees.

For infrastructure support organisations, funders of infrastructure and evaluators, these leakages beg a range of questions about when to ask about impact, who to ask, and what to ask them.

6.4 Targeting infrastructure investment

Of course, not all support and capacity building interventions are the same. We have noted that SYSIP-funded support has been focused on different issues, organised and provided in different ways and involved different methods. Some are more intense and long term (e.g. support provided on a 'one to one' basis), whilst others might be more extensive and fleeting (e.g. support provided on a 'one to many' basis).

It is arguable that more intense forms of support are likely to yield transformational effects, compared to less intense support. However, the link may not be a conclusive

⁷ See, for example, Cupitt with Mihailidou (2009) and the current work of NCVO's Big Lottery Funded 'Value of Infrastructure' Programme <http://www.strategy-impact.org.uk/page.asp?id=1548>

⁸ Support was suggested by one provider to be '*like wallpaper*' in the sense of being part of the background and therefore taken for granted.

one. But insofar as it is true, it suggests a familiar 'trade off' for infrastructure organisations, and opens a policy debate about whether investment in core infrastructure support should prioritise depth (increasing the prospects for transformation, but amongst fewer organisations) or breadth and reach (increasing access to support for a wider set of organisations, but limiting transformative potential). A debate about appropriate targeting of capacity building support is likely to intensify in the next few years given the prospect of political change and public expenditure constraint.

6.5 Recommendations

The South Yorkshire Social Infrastructure Programme has funded a wide range of activities. Elsewhere (in the cross-cutting reports) **we have argued that it would have benefited the formulation of an agreed strategy for the investment of resources at the outset.** This is not to deny the merit or real impacts of many of the projects funded.

A central remit of SYSIP and especially funds for core infrastructure was to increase the sustainability of the voluntary and community organisations assisted, and more broadly the sector itself.

The findings from this report do not lend themselves to straight-forward policy or practice recommendations. Case study organisations supported were by definition 'touched by' the programme, and they tend to be positive about this support. Of course there are many organisations who were not supported, some with greater needs than those used as case studies.

Organisations were realistic about the 'sustainability agenda' and the scope for independent income generation, for example from selling services under contract to public agencies. This is clearly a policy and emerging agenda for many organisations but this is far from the majority of organisations which make up the sector. This is not to deny that organisations which do not sell services do not have benefits, either intrinsically or the achievement of wider policy goals. The support demanded from core infrastructure services is likely to continue to come from a relatively broad set of diverse organisations. Nonetheless, the continuing development of methodologies to **help infrastructure organisations demonstrate impact is likely to rise in importance.**

The support from core infrastructure is often relatively small, although many organisations participating in the research valued this highly, and found it necessary for their existence (e.g. around charity accounting or governance advice). **A debate for the sector and policy makers, in the context of public expenditure constraint, is around the future role of infrastructure and the extent to which support and capacity building should be targeted.** The evidence presented here suggests that this is not a simple trade-off and a more subtle debate is required.

Annex 1: References

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Annex 2 Interview schedule

Key question:

To what extent and how are organisations supported by SYSIP funded core infrastructure services stronger (more sustainable, more resilient) as a result?

- Can you describe your organisation? [purpose, activities, beneficiaries, location, staffing, income, governance]
- How did the support arise - how did you make contact?
- How did you hear about the services that were on offer?
- What was the problem which led to you seek support?
- Did you know what support they could offer?
- To what extent did you understand the problem you were raising?
- Did they undertake a 'needs analysis'?
- To what extent were new concepts or issues introduced?
- What did they do to provide support? Please describe
- Had you been elsewhere for support? Please provide details
- Did they signpost you elsewhere? Please provide details and outcomes
- Did they do any follow up work for you?
- What difference did the support make? (short term, long term, intended, unintended, positive, negative)
- To what extent and in what ways is your organisation stronger as a result?
- To what extent and in what ways were your skills and knowledge developed?
- Could you tackle this kind of problem again without support?