

Voice4Change England briefing paper

Community Organisers Programme

January 2012

1. What is the Community Organisers programme?

The Community Organisers programme is a £15 million government-funded Big Society initiative. The programme aims to recruit and train 5,000 community organisers to help local communities to come together to tackle local issues and develop community projects in deprived areas in England. The programme started in February 2011 and will run for the lifetime of this Parliament (until May 2015).

Through the programme government wants to strengthen community spirit; encourage participation of the local community; increase the effectiveness of existing community groups; create new community groups and social enterprises; and support communities to tackle local issues important to them.

2. What will community organisers do?

Community organisers will work closely with local communities to identify local priorities, projects and opportunities, and to support communities to improve their local area. Specifically they will be expected to:

- Support communities to take action on the issues that matter most to them.
- Help the community to challenge vested interests and drive change in public and private sector organisations and in the community.
- Build community self-reliance and individual and collective responsibility.
- Encourage diverse people to work with others to improve the quality of life locally.
- Identify local leaders who can take actions forward.
- Support and link new and existing community and neighbourhood groups.

To do this community organisers will approach local people in places such as cafes, schools gates, shops, parks and places of worship and by knocking on doors to understand people's thoughts about their communities. They will be expected to listen to between seven and fifteen local residents each day and write up a record of the issues raised and the potential for those individuals to take action.

3. How many community organisers will there be?

The programme will recruit and train 5000 community organisers over four years. The organisers will be divided into:

- **500 'senior' full-time community organisers** who will coordinate organising activity over a relatively large area (e.g. a Borough or District)

- **4500 part-time voluntary community organisers** who will support the senior organisers at a more local level.

4. Where will community organisers be based?

100-200 host organisations will be recruited over the life of the project to provide a base for community organisers to train and work for 12 months. They will also provide trainee organisers with knowledge about the local area, and offer support and guidance. Host organisations can be voluntary and community organisations (VCOs), education or private sector organisations. All hosts will receive a two day induction from Locality¹ to plan for resilience and sustainability of community organisers. Applications to become a host are currently open.

When the programme was launched, 11 'kickstarters'² were chosen as the first host organisations, on the basis that they were ready to get started quickly and would help shape the programme. The kickstarters have recruited the first cohort of community organisers who started their training in September 2011.

5. How will community organisers be trained?

Senior community organisers will receive training to support them in cohorts of 40-50 every 2-3 months until 2015. RE:generate³ are providing the training through their Root Solution Listening Matters approach. This focuses on building trusting and respectful relationships between people in diverse communities through one-to-one listening and conversation. It helps seek out the root causes of problems and develop solutions to address the causes, through self-help actions, campaigns, or both.

6. How will Community Organisers be resourced?

The senior community organisers will receive a bursary of £20,000 for the first year only. This pays their wages, meets the costs of local organising and contributes to their advanced training fees. Locality will support the hosts and community organiser teams to help secure funding for the newly-qualified community organisers after their first training year.

The 4,500 voluntary community organisers are part-time and unpaid. They are directly recruited and supported by the senior community organisers through their work in local communities.

7. How will community organising be different from community development?

Community organising is an approach to empowering local communities originating in the US. It is a technique notably used by Barack Obama who worked as a community organiser in Chicago early in his career.

¹ See Section 8

² To view a full list of kickstarter organisations and to keep up to date with recruited hosts visit <http://locality.org.uk/projects/community-organisers/>

³ See <http://www.regeneratetrust.org/>

It has radical routes that focus on redistributing power to communities, getting communities focused and agitated about the issues they face and bringing communities together to solve their own problems through collective action⁴. Several different approaches to community organising have developed over the years. The Community Organisers programme blends a mix of these approaches and is unique in its use of host organisations for organisers.

The programme has some similarities to traditional community development such as the use of face to face meetings and there are blurred boundaries between the two approaches. However potential differences are:

- **Independence:** community development workers have often relied on state funding to deliver their work, taking an outcome based approach. Government wants to ensure community organisers are independent from the state by requiring them to raise their own funds after year one and by not requiring any accountability to local or central government.
- **Focus on communities of place:** community organisers listen to and involve all community members rather than focusing on communities of interest or specific disadvantaged groups.

There have been some tensions between existing community development work and the focus on community organising, particularly with the impact of spending cuts on community development work and associated loss of community development workers. However it is hoped that the community organisers programme will complement existing community development work and the 'Campaign for Community Development' event findings suggest that Community Development workers can work with community organisers to develop good practice⁵.

8. Who is running the programme?

Locality, a national membership network of community led organisations, was chosen to manage the Community Organisers programme in February 2011. A Programme Board has been set up to oversee the programme and is chaired by a Locality Trustee. It includes

- **RE:generate** who are leading on the design and delivery of the training to community organisers.
- **Office for Civil Society**
- **2 community organisers** – elected by the first cohort of organisers.
- **2 host organisations** – elected by the first cohort of hosts.

In addition Locality is working with other partners including:

- Urban Forum, Church Urban Fund and the Faith-based Regeneration Network to help recruit hosts and organisers.
- University of Brighton and Manchester Metropolitan University who are developing advanced courses as an option for the community organisers.

⁴ See Saul Alinsky 'Rules for Radicals' (1971)

⁵ Campaign for community development launch paper, action summary, 2011 <http://www.fcdl.org/projects/current/280-campaign-for-community-development>

9. How does it link to other Big Society programmes?

The programme closely links to a number of other Big Society initiatives:

- **Community First programme⁶:** An £80 million government funded initiative to encourage communities to come together to identify local priorities and to give time, money, goods and services to improve the quality of life in the local community. Where appropriate, community organisers will support communities to identify local priorities and to encourage community participation.
- **Business Connectors:** An initiative led by Business in the Community to build networks between local business and the local voluntary and community sector. Business connectors are people seconded from large businesses into community businesses and organisations. Community organisers will work to build the links between businesses and community groups.
- **Localism:** Community organisers will help communities take up new rights under the Localism Act. For example the Act will give communities the right to bid for assets, such as buildings and land, which they feel are of value to them. Community organisers can work with communities to identify the assets and help them to put in a bid.

10. What does the programme offer to equality VCOs?

The Community Organiser programme aims to give those who are not usually heard a chance to have their say and influence what happens in their communities, as well as to build cohesion. Equality VCOs could play an important role in supporting community organisers to ensure broad participation of diverse groups that reflect the local community. There are several ways equality organisations could get involved in the programme:

- **Apply to become a host organisation:** Applications are being invited from all VCOs to become hosts. Hosts need to be willing to embrace the 'transformative' approach; be independent; and able to support the community organisers to be independent, including of the host itself. Community organisers will need to be able to **support all communities from all backgrounds** across the whole area in which they are based.
- **Advocate for diverse communities:** Provide a case for the need for community organisers to engage with diverse communities and the benefits this can bring. You can support community organisers to reach the communities you work with and to be aware of community projects working with specific groups.
- **Awareness raising:** Ensure diverse communities are aware of the programme and how to be actively engaged in the opportunities it presents. This may include encouraging individuals from diverse communities to apply to become community organisers.
- **Infrastructure support:** Encourage community organisers to signpost diverse communities wishing to start community groups and charities to the services you have to offer.

⁶ Voice4Change England has produced a briefing on the Community First programme which is downloadable at <http://www.voice4change-england.co.uk/content/how-can-all-communities-benefit-big-society>

- **Evidence base:** Provide any evidence and research to community organisers and policy makers which demonstrates the benefits of working with diverse communities. This may include identifying any gaps in the delivery of public services to specific communities and the effect this has on them, as well as any barriers faced by diverse communities.

11. Examples of community organising for equality

- Women Acting in Today's Society, a Birmingham based charity, used community organising to increase the numbers of Black and Minority Ethnic women taking on school governor roles.
- Citizens UK, based in London, used community organising principles to successfully campaign around the 'living wage' and the treatment of asylum seekers.
- Gamaliel Foundation, based in the US, used community organising to secure improved civil rights for immigrants.

12. Further information

To find out more about the Community Organisers programme and to apply to become a community organiser or a host organisation visit:
<http://www.cocollaborative.org.uk>

To search for community organisers and host organisations in your area visit:
<http://www.cocollaborative.org.uk/members>

To read our briefing on the Community First programme visit:
<http://www.voice4change-england.co.uk/content/how-can-all-communities-benefit-big-society>

If you would like to learn more about other Big Society policies and programmes relevant to you visit:
<http://www.voice4change-england.co.uk/content/voice4change-england-guide-big-society-policies-and-programmes>

This briefing is part of Voice4Change England's programme of work with the Women's Resource Centre, commissioned by the Office for Civil Society, to provide advice to Government on the challenges that inequalities present to the Big Society agenda and how to address them; and the opportunities for tackling inequalities that the Big Society agenda offers.